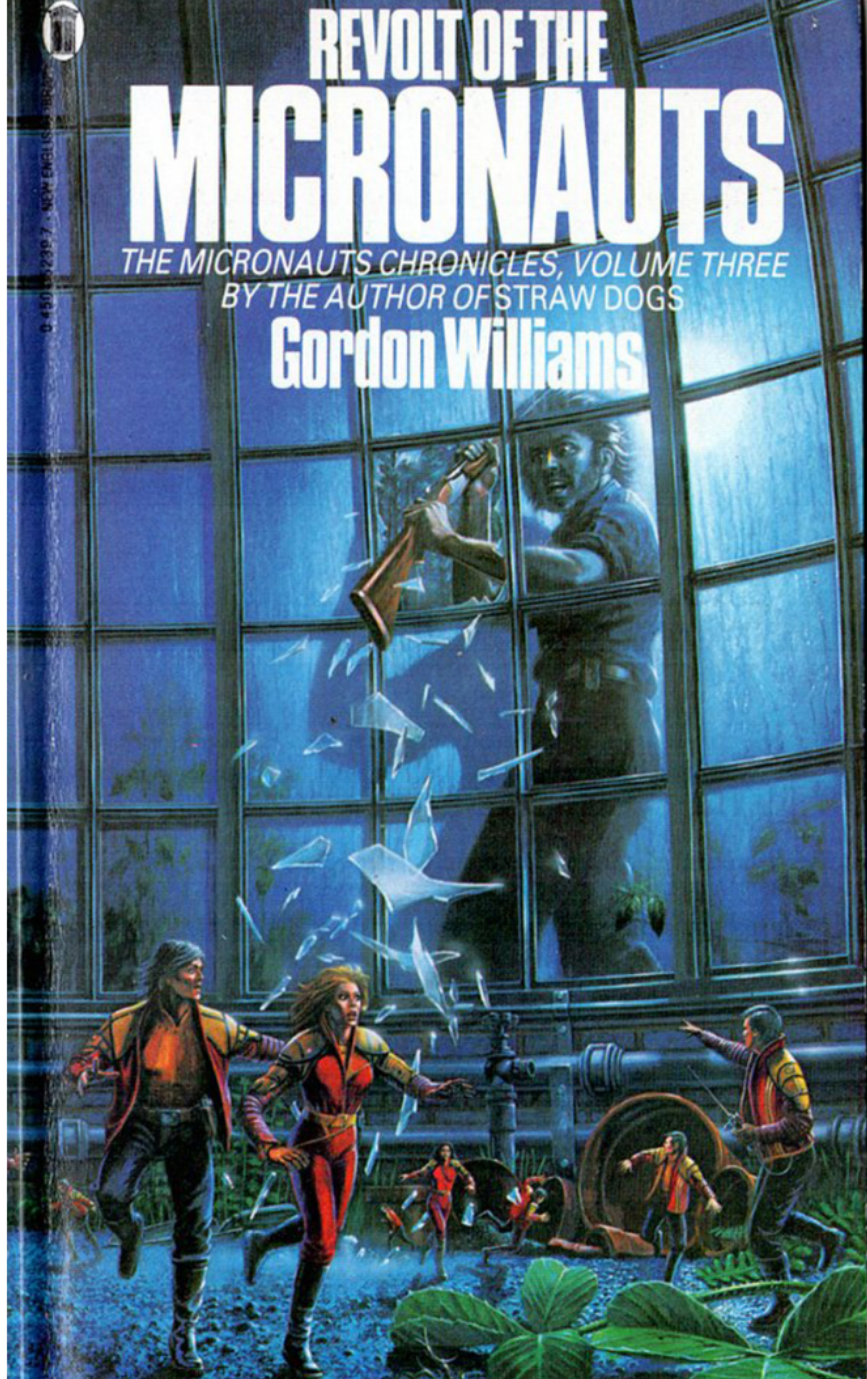


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REVOLT OF THE MICRONAUTS

THE MICRONAUTS CHRONICLES, VOLUME THREE
BY THE AUTHOR OF STRAW DOGS

Gordon Williams



REVOLT OF THE MICRONAUTS

Somewhere out there were the outlaws.

Pathetically few and ill-equipped, they were still
both threat and promise.

To the ruthless hierarchy of the Colony they were
a threat for they kept alive the idea of freedom. Yet
if the rumour of Guidenian's woman's pregnancy
was true, they were also a hope, the hope, for the
future.

Micro-cloned products of a coldly insane attempt
to ensure human survival, the inhabitants of the
Colony had not yet bred. One child, just one, would
be the sign that they were a species with a life of its
own, a future. That they were not just the sterile
end-product of a failed experiment.

Threat and promise, the outlaws must be hunted,
tricked, driven into captivity.

Revolt of the Micronauts

by Gordon Williams

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Chapter 1

A Plague Called Science...

Agnew had never prayed before.

When the bearded men on the platform bowed their heads, he glanced to his right; next to him in the row of Records Division personnel, Maddox casually mimed a throat-cutting gesture. Agnew realized he had always hated Maddox.

An uneasy shuffling and murmuring rose from the packed rows of WFC bureaucrats. In a moment of carelessness, Agnew caught the eye of a bearded Arab soldier in the gangway. To Agnew's horror, the soldier solemnly gestured at him to bow his head.

Agnew's hands were shaking as he sat forward in his seat. On the platform, the bearded leaders of the victorious rebels stood motionless, heads bowed, hands clasped: one of them, a tall, white man, stepped forward to the speaker's rostrum.

Peeping through his fingers, Agnew saw soldiers gesticulating at any man or woman whose head was not bowed or whose eyes were not closed in prayer. Agnew closed his eyes. He had always thought of himself as an atheist. He prayed anyway.

'We ask all things in total humility,' a chanting voice boomed from the loudspeakers. A stir of movement passed across the vast auditorium.

Only when the people in front of him had straightened up did Agnew sit back, making no sudden movement that would draw the attention of the soldiers in the gangways. Maddox nudged his knee. Agnew stared straight ahead.

Unbelievably, Maddox spoke in a cheerful whisper:

'Hallot is the small one to the right...'

Agnew jabbed his elbow into Maddox's ribs. Maddox grunted. He was grinning! Agnew's eyes flicked to left and right, trying to see if they were being watched by the soldiers. To his relief, a woman started sobbing, four or five rows in front.

Bearded soldiers moved towards the disturbance, gesturing for the

woman to keep quiet. There was some kind of commotion and Agnew saw people rising, soldiers moving into the row. The woman was wailing and then she shouted something. Her voice was demented and incoherent.

They pulled her along the row and then escorted her up the side gangway. It was Madeleine Romney from Criminal Records!

In the confusion, Maddox leaned closer: 'You'll be fine, George, you're a survivor,' he murmured.

'Shut up!'

Maddox grinned. 'Are your hands sweating, George? Surely—

Suddenly, Maddox, like everyone else in the packed rows, stiffened in his seat.

The small man had a white streak in his beard. He was walking slowly towards the speaker's rostrum.

Agnew stared in disbelief. The legendary Hallot? The obscure schoolteacher who had overthrown the armed forces of World Food Control?

He wore the same gray combat smock as the rest of the bearded rebel leaders. His black hair was pulled back from a wide forehead and tied in a knot. He walked awkwardly, stiffly, hands clasped on his stomach.

When he stood behind the rostrum desk he seemed so small Agnew had a terrible urge to laugh out loud.

A murmur went round the hall. Hallot waited impassively. The rest of the platform party sat in a semi-circle on either side of the rostrum. Still Hallot waited.

Agnew could not take his eyes off the small figure in the gray smock. He remembered when he'd heard the name Hallot for the first time, about a year before, some trouble over child labor in Southern Africa, a local schoolteacher had defied the Area Council and then escaped from an interrogation center. Some said he was originally from Australia, others had him as an Englishman who had lived in North America – nobody knew much about him and why should they? Local trouble-makers popped up all over the Scheduled Zones – nationalists, brigands, petty criminals, would-be revolutionaries and outright gangsters – none survived long against the combined security apparatus and armies of WFC.

Hallot had survived.

Within a year, his name had been banned from the media. Rumors of mass insurrection had reached the lower echelons of WFC headquarters in Geneva but officially WFC admitted nothing. Even when insurrection

reached France and massive troop movements made it impossible to hide the scale of the conflict, Agnew, like everyone else in the administration, had no inkling of what Hallot meant and what forces he represented.

And now both Commissioner Canetti and Chief of Staff Voigt had fled. All military and administrative leaders were under arrest ... and the small man with the streaked beard was standing at the rostrum, in the very heart of the historic building from where half of the globe had been ruled for almost twenty years...

At last Hallot moved to speak. It was a low voice at first. It silenced all murmurings and stilled all movement. 'In humility we acknowledge our sins against the Divinity. In gratitude we render thanks to the Guiding Hand that led us out of the wilderness.'

Agnew felt embarrassed. The phrases echoed things he had read in old books, superstition, the mumbo-jumbo of ignorant peasants. To hear such words from that rostrum was an affront. Great world leaders and scientists had stood in this hall – men who had led the human race through famines and disasters that threatened man's very existence!

Hallot raised his right hand. The low voice came at a higher pitch. 'Millions died from a plague called science!'

Maddox was staring as if hypnotized at the rostrum. Agnew looked along the row. He saw only faces in profile – wherever he looked, faces, fixed eyes — fifteen hundred men and women, the trained élite of a system that had ruled the world all frozen in awe.

'We have not come as conquerors for we are your brothers and sisters in humanity. We have fought a just war against oppression and vanity. The vanity of proud men who thought they were above the natural order. The oppression of evil men who set themselves up against Divinity ... we have not come to seize power — men of power led us to death and destruction. We have not come to punish – although men of evil, men who arrogantly tortured and oppressed, men steeped in the vices of materialism — those men must pay for their crimes. *But*, to our brothers and sisters whose only sin was cowardice and acquiescence, we offer our fellowship. To err is human. The Guiding Hand teaches us to forgive all who honestly renounce the delusions and mistakes of arrogance and pride and vanity...'

The booming voice came from all sides. The more Agnew stared, the more Hallot's head seemed to swell. Agnew felt a growing temptation to let himself be swamped by the combination of the resonant voice and the strange visual distortion that made the small figure loom over the

whole auditorium.

‘To err is human and forgivable,’ Hallot’s voice echoed from the loudspeakers, ‘but wilful crimes against the Divine order of Man and Nature must be punished. Science and materialism poisoned the earth which is our home. Science and materialism led us into darkness and death.’

Hallot swayed slightly. His right arm began to make slow, slicing motions in time to the cadences of his speech.

‘In the name of the millions who starved, we demand atonement! In the sacred memory of the children who were robbed of life, we demand justice! Over the unmarked graves of our brothers and sisters, we demand retribution! In answer to the accusing voices of the unborn millions, we beg forgiveness!’

Hallot bowed his head.

The tall white man who had given the first prayer stepped forward again and raised his face, eyes closed. ‘Let us open our hearts and minds in collective humility, let us silence the clamor of our misguided spirits and accept the power of the Guiding Hand. Make us worthy of its help and ask that we should be made one with all manifestations of the Divinity...’

Agnew stared down at his knees, nerves taut in anticipation of the first defiant shout that would break the eery silence in the auditorium.

He had no doubt of the murderous reality behind the mumbo-jumbo. In a way he wished he was brave enough and reckless enough to be the one who would rise in defiance of Hallot’s pseudo-religious ravings...

He looked up. The soldiers in the aisles were gesturing and smiling at the rows of seated bureaucrats, inviting them to stand.

To Agnew, the soldiers’ smiles looked trance-like, the ecstasy of medieval witch-burners; he was careful to rise at the same time as the people in front of him, looking neither too eager nor too reluctant, just one, average, anonymous, hum-drum figure in a green uniform, that was neither too dirty nor too well-pressed.

‘Thank God we’re not part of the evil forces of science,’ Maddox muttered in the brightly-lit corridor. Bearded soldiers from Hallot’s ruffian army of semi-literate peasants and criminals swarmed in and out of offices, carrying files, questioning frightened administrators, taking away senior officials.

Agnew felt reason for optimism; keeping records did not involve him

in any degree of policy-making. Hallot's obsessional hatred of science and scientists would surely not extend to technocrats. He saw several men wearing black or green WFC uniforms and began to realize how the rabble army had triumphed: he remembered Maddox making himself unpopular a few weeks earlier among a group of liberal SG controllers. Maddox had said he took Hallot seriously — he'd advocated the use of aerial flame-platforms to wipe out the insurrectionists en masse.

At the time, the WFC military staff had been trying to hold Hallot's forces back for the purposes of negotiation – the SG controllers attacked Maddox bitterly, accusing him of genocidal élitism — now Agnew saw it quite clearly; they were not liberals, they were traitors! Hallot had not triumphed by force of arms but by the insidious corruption of mysticism!

Perverved as his logic might be, Hallot was right about one thing: WFC had been preoccupied with technological progress in the interests of feeding people. Science and materialism were finally not enough. Human beings still yearned for the emotional security of myth and superstition.

They were stopped by two bearded youths who demanded, in some thick local dialect, to know what section they belonged to. They both carried new automatics.

Maddox spoke to them in formal French. The two youths looked uncertain but in the absence of a superior officer — if this rag-bag army had officers – they gave way to Maddox's air of firm authority.

It didn't work with a bearded negro soldier who stopped them at the access point to the Records Division. Maddox explained that they were returning to their desks as ordered in the conference hall; the negro insisted on coming with them. He was carrying a sub-machine gun!

He saw Maddox into his office and took a note of his ID card number and name. Maddox explained that he translated official memoranda into computer language. The negro made no indication of understanding what this meant but he told Maddox to stay at his normal place of work until further instructions.

'This is my normal place,' Maddox said coolly.

The black soldier smiled. 'Nothing to get hostile about, brother, we've come to give you a better life.'

It was the most chilling statement Agnew had ever heard.

His hand was shaking as he handed over his own ID card when he and the negro were alone in the cramped galleyway which had been his office for six years. The black hand seemed poised to grip him in a

comradely gesture! Agnew stared at prominent white teeth with wide gaps. The negro looked up and down the narrow gangway of consoles and terminal screens. 'You keep records in here, brother?'

Agnew smiled. 'Not exactly.' He showed the black man the data-retrieval screens, the closed-circuit communication screen, the input-console. 'Once Maddox has put a report into the correct terminology, I give it the correct reference number for its general classification and I feed it in here. At any time it can be brought up on the terminal screen here. Anybody in the building can have it switched through on the closed-circuit screen, provided they have access authority. All very complicated I suppose.'

'White man's magic?' smiled the black man. 'I come from the heart of darkest Paris, brother. I was a mineralogist before some bastard in this building signed me into a labor battalion.'

'Ah, we don't handle Criminal Records here,' Agnew said quickly.

'I'm not looking for revenge, brother. Didn't you hear Hallot?'

'He talked a lot about atonement and retribution—'

'You're not a scientist, are you? Where is the data bank?'

'Somewhere under the building—'

'You don't know?'

'All I know is that it's a fireproof vault with automatic temperature and humidity control. I've never even seen it. Perhaps I should explain. This building is designed—'

'I know how the building is designed.' The black man pointed to the closed-circuit screen. 'That's not how human beings were supposed to live, speaking to each other on video screens! Blood and flesh, brother, the fellowship! You keep *all* the scientific data?' Agnew nodded. The black man put a hard, heavy arm round his shoulder. 'There's nothing for you to worry about, brother. Just don't touch anything and remember — we're here to extend the hand of friendship in Divinity!' He started to edge along the cramped galleyway, then looked back at Agnew, still smiling. 'Just for the moment the Guiding Hand is carrying a gun!'

Agnew was still standing in front of the dead screens when Maddox appeared.

'I've just heard — they've taken Colston! We'll be next!'

Agnew faced him calmly. 'In my time I've seen three Commissioners come and go. I've survived violent policy upheavals that cleared out ninety per cent of the people I first worked with in this building. But I did my job and served whatever administration was in control. If you

want to spread alarm and despondency I wish you'd go somewhere else, Maddox.'

'Very good, George,' Maddox said wryly. 'This time, however, your new masters come on a wave of religious mania. A holy war on science and scientists! The fact that you know how to punch up data on that screen makes you suspect. These people are ripe for a *massacre*, George.'

'All we do is keep records.'

'There's stuff in the data bank that'll make their beards stand on end!' Agnew sighed patiently. 'And no doubt the people responsible will suffer for it.'

Maddox glanced over his shoulder, then grabbed Agnew by the lapel. 'You and I fed *every* bit of data into the system. We had access to every piece of classified information! Arcadia Two alone is enough to get us shot.'

'We only processed the data—'

'You imagine Hallot's hairy mystics seeing the details of Arcadia Two coming up on the screen,' Maddox hissed. 'Ten thousand people, George, ten thousand people turned into laboratory fruit-flies?'

Agnew frowned. 'We didn't make policy...'

'You think Hallot's Guiding bloody Hand will pat us on the back? Cell-cloning identical replicas at a scale reduction of thirty-five! You wouldn't call *that* interfering with the Divine order? We have to lose it, George.'

'Erase it?' Agnew frowned. 'But it's listed in the master index.'

'Only as a number! All that Special Research stuff is covered by codes — as long as nothing comes up on the screen they'll never know what the hell those projects were about! George, why do you think they grabbed Colston so fast? Special Research is their number one target!'

Agnew frowned. 'Yes, possibly you're right...'

'We programed it, George! You and me! To Hallot's maniacs we'll be just as guilty as any of those masterminds in Special Research!'

Agnew thought about it. Maddox came near to exploding. Then Agnew started to punch buttons on a console. 'What are you doing?' Maddox snapped.

'You have to open the retrieval circuit before you can instruct for wiping,' Agnew said with maddening calm. The small screen came to life:

OFFICE OF SPECIAL RESEARCH...ARCADIA TWO...
RESTRICTED ACCESS QUOTE

AUTHORIZATION CODE...

Agnew closed his eyes.

‘What’s wrong now?’ Maddox hissed.

‘I’m trying to remember the access authorization code,’ Agnew said patiently. Maddox clenched his fists and raised his eyes to the ceiling. Agnew muttered some numbers to himself, then punched another series of buttons. The screen wiped clear and up came a new top line:

OFFICE OF SPECIAL RESEARCH...
CLASSIFIED WHITE,
MAXIMUM RESTRICTED ACCESS...
PROJECT...ARCADIA TWO...
CURRENT STATUS...INOPERATIVE BENIGN...

‘What the hell does that mean?’ Maddox whispered.

‘You should keep up with my nomenclature improvements,’ Agnew explained. ‘It isn’t getting budget authorization for ongoing funding but it hasn’t been terminated. Benign neglect was the old-fashioned phrase.’ They both watched the screen.

LOCATION... LONDON AREA REDMAP GRID
SEVEN-TWO/FIFTY FOUR...
ORIGINATION...COMMISSIONER AUTHORIZATION CROSSREF
PASSOS TWELVE/ONE NINE/SIX SIX NINE...

‘Old Passos — I could’ve guessed,’ Maddox sneered. ‘We will invent our own future — then he ended up more reactionary and paranoiac than old Towne himself!’

‘I came here under Passos,’ Agnew said stiffly. ‘For my generation he represented—’

‘Yeah, yeah, you’ve told me many times. Let’s wipe it, George!’

PURPOSE...CROSSREF ARCADIA ONE...
SITE CONTROL...
CROSSREF BRICE, ROBERT...
CROSSREF KHOMICH, ANDREI ILYANOVICH...

Agnew pointed to the red button marked ‘ERASE’. ‘You do it, Maddox.’

Maddox looked suspicious. 'Why me?'

'I thought you'd enjoy consigning ten thousand people to oblivion.'

'We're only erasing the retrieval tape, the manual records will still exist.'

'Yes, somewhere among a million or so docket. A hundred people doing a physical comb-out might come across it in six months, maybe a year.'

Maddox hesitated. 'We're not wiping the *people*...'

'If nobody knows they exist who's going to supply them? Maybe Hallot would have brought them back – rehabilitated them as victims of scientific cruelty.'

'You know damn well those people are never coming back under *any* circumstances.'

'Go ahead then.' Maddox reached out his hand. Agnew shrugged. 'Go on, Maddox, we'll be safe. Ten thousand people won't exist, of course, not officially, not where it matters, not on a data retrieval screen...'

They heard voices from the corridor. Maddox took a sharp breath and put his middle finger on the red button marked 'ERASE'.

Agnew went forward politely to meet the black soldier and a man wearing steel-rimmed spectacles...

Chapter 2

Operation Wildfire

‘Our lousy lives? You think those twitchy maniacs back in the big bubble would hesitate? One raincloud on the horizon and it’s Go for Wildfire! We’ll roast to a shrivel with the bugs and over tonight’s hot meal they’ll be calling it the price of progress!’

Huge veined wings glinted with a purple sheen in the towering vault of pale sunlight.

Kirsten Shadd stared up in awe, momentarily forgetting her mission.

The magnificent purple emperor soared in spiraling flight, up and up through the canopy of yellow leaves towards a dazzle of purplish-blue sky.

Kirsten Shadd had a moment of doubt. She had been prepared for savagery, not for this dreamlike eruption of beauty, not for a world where a butterfly could make her feel small and malignant.

Dull gun metal swiveled in a short arc and Bagley fired up at the butterfly.

She saw disgust and hatred on Sisson’s face but he made no move to interfere. Bagley squeezed the trigger again.

The second bullet ripped a jagged line through a mottled wing. The purple emperor shuddered into a lopsided dive and crashed sideways onto a mass of dying creeper.

Huge wings flapped desperately. Down through pale sunlight came a soft shower of opaque wing scales, like snowflakes colored purple and brown and white.

The slim, hard-faced patrol leader lowered his rifle. ‘Once a marksman, always a marksman,’ he smirked.

Dirkovitch stared at him incredulously, frowning. ‘Why the hell shoot a *butterfly*, Bagley?’

‘You seen anything better to shoot?’ Bagley grinned.

The huge wings went on flapping and they moved into a curtain of

brittle bindweed to escape the showering wing scales. Dirkovitch looked at Sissons, waiting on the senior field scout to support him. Sissons said nothing.

Dirkovitch got in front of Bagley. 'That's your level of marksmanship, is it? Two shots – and you only got it in the wing!'

Bagley moved so quickly that Kirsten did not see whether he pushed or punched Dirkovitch. But the youngest scout was on his back, Bagley standing over him, his lean, weather-hardened face tight with an almost amused vindictiveness. 'You were saying, kid?'

Sissons still said nothing. Dirkovitch scrambled to his feet. She came between them, as if by accident. In a matter of fact voice, she asked, 'Aren't you going to put it out of its misery, Bagley?'

He smiled at her. 'They don't feel things like we do. Sentimentality wastes ammunition.'

As they forced their way into the hanging tendrils of the drought-stricken jungle, Kirsten Shadd heard a man's voice promising revenge on Bagley. It sounded like Sissons, yet the oldest field scout's lips were clamped shut...

She had been with them for two days in the main group and all that morning on their own in the dying jungle but she was still making up her mind which of them it had to be:

Dirkovitch was young and aggressive, but naive and probably too loyal.

Bagley posed as a cold-blooded killing machine, but there was a sneakiness about him, an adolescent need to make her frightened of him.

Sissons had more brains than the other two put together, but experience warned her against a choice made on personal attraction.

Bagley was the only one she actively disliked but in a mission like this, liking and disliking were irrelevant, maybe even a factor that would make Bagley her best bet.

One of them had to be killed, she was sure of that now...

Bagley was slashing ahead with his Prod, clearing a tunnel through the hanging tendrils, when they froze at a weird snuffling noise. Somewhere ahead a large creature was rustling among dead vegetation.

Dirkovitch touched her arm and nodded for her to get behind him.

The three field scouts eased forward at a crouch, sliding their rifles off their shoulders, their red and black uniforms brushing against the dry

tendrils that twisted all the way down from the jungle canopy.

She kept close behind, so close she tramped on Dirkovitch's heel. He elbowed her away without looking round. They came to the edge of a clearing.

Over his shoulder she had a glimpse of a solid hump of brown spines with pale tips. The creature turned and she saw a brown animal face haloed by shorter spines.

Sissons gesticulated, indicating a wide detour. Bagley shook his head, pointing up at the towering canopy. They had no time for detours, it was past high-sun, and they had fifty yards to cover before dark.

At that moment, Sissons's impassive face was only inches from hers, his mouth did not open, yet distinctly she heard him asking for help.

It was no time for logical analysis of something that was probably a trick of the imagination. The spiny creature turned towards them again and she saw a wet snout and small piggy eyes in a protruding brown muzzle.

She wanted to run then, her feet seemed to be sliding away with a will of their own. Glancing down, she saw that she was standing on a colorless, discarded skin of scales. She was deciding it was too large for an insect skin when the first shot exploded in the clearing.

The spiny creature curled instantly into a tight ball.

Bagley's mean eyes narrowed. 'You object to me shooting that spiny pig, Dirk?' he drawled.

Dirkovitch went to move but she caught his arm. Sissons turned away and stared up at the dying creeper.

Bagley dropped on one knee and pumped another bullet into the ball of spines.

The hedgehog uncurled with a tortured squeaking so high-pitched it oscillated beyond the human auditory horizon. She heard Sissons's voice, anguished and pleading, but he made no attempt to stop Bagley.

The rifle cracked again.

The hedgehog jerked. Short, hairy forelegs stiffened and skidded on dead leaves. The dark snout ploughed into dry humus. A spume of dust and fragments billowed up towards the jungle canopy. Blood oozed through brown hair.

Through the squeaking and the crashing of brittle leaves and the explosion of Bagley's rifle, she heard Sissons shouting... 'help me, help me!'

Yet, as before, his face was impassive, his mouth firmly closed.

Imagination, intuition, perhaps even a vestige of telepathy induced by

fear — how or why did not matter, she could *feel* what was going on in Sissons's mind.

And that made him the one who could help her — the one she could control.

Bagley stood up and calmly reloaded. Dirkovitch caught her eye. He grimaced apologetically – Bagley was the patrol leader, what could he do? She tried to let him know she understood — in the almost sexual intensity of Bagley's lust to kill, any interference would have been suicidal.

The hedgehog's stocky hindleg stretched and quivered in a last orgasmic convulsion.

When Bagley gestured for them to move on, she had some vague memory of slipping on a skin of dry scales but already she was thinking coldly and logically, weighing up the factors that would decide whether Dirkovitch or Bagley had to be killed.

Skirting the clearing they heard an ominous buzzing from overhead and they hurried on. Her nose caught the thin reek of ammonia and looking back she saw a big, blue-black carrion fly walking across the spiny hump of the dead hedgehog. This time, Bagley's expression was of deep revulsion and he growled at them to hurry.

Strangely enough, the pointless savagery of what she had just witnessed made her feel relaxed. Whatever she had to do, she need feel no trace of guilt...

Chapter 3

‘Why are you doing that?’ Steane had demanded when he turned from locking his office door to find her calmly unbuttoning her shirt.

‘I assumed that’s why you...’

‘You assumed wrongly,’ he said, motioning for her to sit at the other side of the desk in the small, sparsely-furnished room on Tier Two. ‘Are you very promiscuous, Shad?’

She flushed with resentment. ‘What else was I supposed to assume, the deputy commandant asking me to come to his office at this time of night?’

‘Whatever I had in mind, you were willing to comply?’ He shook his head. ‘You’re not here because of your physical attractiveness.’ He lifted a stiff file from the desk and showed her the name stenciled on the cover. Her own name. ‘I remembered you from the trial of Wisnovsky — what I didn’t know until yesterday was that you came here with a fake background. You weren’t a research assistant at the Paris PCB, you were a trained SG agent in the Political Section. It doesn’t say why you volunteered for Arcadia Two...’ He waited but she gave no explanation. He turned over the papers in the file. ‘Why did they let you go?’

‘I presume somebody found me unreliable.’

He shrugged, closing the file. ‘All it says here is you volunteered. If you were classed as subversive you would’ve been transferred to a labor camp or shot. Probably somebody saw you as a threat – a lot of people came here that way. Old scores being settled, grudges—’ he looked at her sharply – ‘or did they trick you?’

‘No, they told me exactly what I was volunteering for.’

‘I see,’ he shrugged. ‘You weren’t the only one.’

‘The only what?’

‘They told you it was a reversible process, didn’t they?’ She pretended not to understand. He smiled. ‘They told me the same thing. In fact, they told every man and woman of the ten thousand, five hundred and forty-three people in this Colony that one day they could go back. You’re too intelligent to cling to an illusion, Shadd. There never was any going back, not for any of us. In every respect but one we are the dead.’

‘Which respect is that?’

'You don't *feel* dead, do you?'

'I feel very much alive.'

'Good. You must be pretty bored working in the productivity office.'

'No, I enjoy the work, as it happens.'

'A trained SG agent? Thinking up happy slogans for fieldworkers?'

'It's better than having to lie and pretend to trick people so that some thug in an interrogation cellar knows the eight questions to ask.'

'Is that your considered view of authority?'

She smiled coldly. 'What do you want me for?'

'There's a certain amount of lying and pretending involved, but I believe it's for the good of the Colony.'

'That's what they always said.'

'I'm *asking* for your help.'

'Very flattering of you. What happens if I don't want to be bullshitted into some dirty operation? I volunteer or I disappear?'

'The Colony isn't run like that any more. Nobody is threatened or—'

'The tunnel diggings haven't been abolished, neither has the Compound.'

'Nobody goes to Detention without an open trial: three judges, one an SG officer, one a representative of the workers' council and one—'

'And one judge nominated by the accused, all very wonderful and democratic. So why bring me here in secret, Steane?'

He told her briskly, treating her as an equal. 'I want to bring Gudenian's people back into the Colony before Geneva resumes full control. The current plan is to take some form of military action against them in the autumn. I think that would be a mistake. People would be killed – possibly including the woman who was pregnant. I don't think Geneva would approve of that.'

'I thought those bastards had abandoned us.'

'They had problems.'

'They left us here to rot!'

'The current administration regards us as a potential scandal but while we keep a low profile they're content to let us exist. Well, I want more than that. This is a scientific project and it has to be maintained as such. When full communications are opened up again I believe it's *vital* that our behavior gives no excuse for some faction to say we should be wiped out. They did it with Arcadia One, remember? If I could outline my idea...'

He briskly explained his scheme and she was shocked, not so much by the cold-bloodedness of it but by her own failure to remember what men

of power were like, even men with boyish faces and clear, honest eyes.

Shocked by something else as well: the stirring within herself of an excitement she thought had been well and truly buried.

‘...but how you communicate would be a case of using your own judgement,’ he concluded.

They stared at each other.

‘I was *naïve*,’ she said wryly, ‘taking my clothes off...?’

‘You’re a realist.’

‘That’s true.’

‘I know you’ve heard it all before, the same old crap about people having to die for the greater good of humanity.’

‘That’s true as well.’

‘As a Sterile society we face two dangers. One, the project will be classed a failure and we may be simply destroyed by order from Geneva. Two, panic from within. I personally have wiped out the past, I’ve made myself accept that this is the only life I’ll ever have — but most of the ten thousand people in this Colony still have a sneaking idea they’ll go back one day. What happens when they realize it’s an illusion?’

‘They’ll have to face reality as well, won’t they?’

‘It’ll be a whole lot easier if we can give ourselves a future.’

‘You don’t even know if the Hoessner woman had a child.’

‘That’s what I want you to find out, if you’re willing to go through with it, of course. All we’ve had in the Colony are false pregnancies and possibly two miscarriages—’

‘Why do you think I became an SG agent in the first place? It excites me, if you want to know.’

‘Have you ever killed a man before?’ She shook her head. ‘I honestly can’t see any other way of giving you a cover story that will convince Gudenian. We tried fake deserters but we found them staked out with their throats cut.’

She remembered then that her shirt was still open at the neck. Calmly she started to fasten the buttons. ‘I won’t be killing anybody if I can help it — getting men to kill each other is never too much of a problem.’ She saw his slight recoil. ‘It’s too late for you to look squeamish, Steane. By the way, one thing we haven’t talked about...’

‘Yes?’

‘What do I get out of all this? All bullshit about the future apart, it is your opening gambit, isn’t it?’ He looked innocently puzzled.

‘What gambit?’

‘I’m the one who’s heard it all before, remember? All I want to know

is what you plan for me when this operation gets you the top job.' Still he pretended not to understand. She shrugged. 'Come off it, Steane. Why isn't your master here?'

'The clear, honest eyes stared at her with a look so devoid of reaction she felt genuinely afraid for the first time in years... and that was another type of excitement she had been deprived of...

Chapter 4

With the first glow of diffused sunlight came a movement of fresh air and with the breeze came a rustling noise, faint to start with, like the tuning up of a distant orchestra.

He stared up at the roof of the gloomy chamber. The pale light was picking out ominously twisted roots and embedded stones that seemed poised to crash down on him.

What is your name? screamed the voices from the dream.

The rustling noise rose to a steady curtain of sound, the hummings and clickings and buzzings of myriad insect life. Through the gentle cacophony he heard murmuring voices.

He knew he was awake... but awake felt less real than the dream...

Angry faces. Black uniforms. His naked feet surrounded by heavy boots.

What is your name, prisoner?

Again he felt a breeze on his cheeks. A shadow broke the glow of sunshine from the tunnel's angled entrance.

'Sissons?' said the woman's voice.

Sissons!

Field boots crunched on the upper ledge of the sunken chamber, sending a small cascade of grit down onto his sleeping bag. The tall woman loomed above him, her face a dark silhouette, light from behind making a misty halo of her short blonde hair.

'You awake, Sissons?'

Something had warned him she could be trouble. He grunted and sat up, yawning. 'You never get much sleep after nightwatch.' He pulled open the sleeping bag and scratched his bare chest. 'Bagley wants to move, does he?'

'He's climbed higher to radio Losey. Sissons, can I ask you something — something personal?'

He felt for his thermal undersuit. 'Personal? What could be personal between us, Assistant Secretary Shadd?' He dragged the sleeping bag off his bare legs and stood up, naked except for two metal discs hanging from a chain round his neck, apparently oblivious to her proximity.

She saw the pale gleam of his skin in the half light. 'I have to talk to

somebody. This is strictly confidential, of course. Yes?’

‘Sure.’

‘Sissons, I realize you’ve only known me for two days, but do you think I could be going insane?’

A neurotic, he thought, just another neurotic careerist from the big bubble. Pulling on his OD breeches he caught the familiar smell of insect-repellent impregnated into rubberized canvas. Most people called it nauseating – he called it the smell of freedom. ‘I really wouldn’t know.’ He wished Bagley would come and get her off his back.

‘I think I might be going insane.’

‘How can you Glasshouse people tell? You’re all insane.’

‘I hate Glasshouse!’ she blurted. ‘I hate everything about it. *Please*, will you listen to me?’

He rummaged around on the hard clay floor for his socks and boots. ‘I’m listening.’

‘It’s going to sound stupid but ... well, I think Bagley is working up to kill me!’ It came in a rush then. ‘I made some mistakes during the purge and they don’t think I’m loyal, it would be just like them to send me out on patrol to get me killed, there’s things going on you wouldn’t believe, they’re keeping them secret, sometimes I think I’m going mad, sometimes — well, please listen! I can hear voices. I know it sounds crazy but I can tell what people are thinking — some of the time anyway — not everybody but...’

He knelt to lace up his boots. Just another neurotic from the big bubble. That was what the smell of insect-repellent told him, that he was well away from that human hive... for the moment, at least.

‘You don’t believe me, do you?’ she whispered.

‘You’re going mad? Hearing voices is one sign, isn’t it?’

‘All right, tell me — have you forgotten your name?’

He was instantly alert. ‘My name’s Sissons.’ In the gloom of the cave he could not see what was on her face. ‘Your first name. What is it?’ she demanded.

‘We don’t use first names.’

‘You don’t remember, do you? You’re losing your memory and I’m developing some kind of telepathy and they won’t admit that it’s happening to more and more people in the Colony!’

‘Who is *they*?’

‘You don’t spend enough time in Glasshouse,’ she said bitterly, ‘you’d know who they are.’ She stood up and turned towards the soft glow of sunshine from the tunnel’s angled entrance. ‘I should have known it

would be a waste of time.'

'All you told me is—'

'You saw him shooting that butterfly — and the hedgehog! He was working himself up to *something*, I know he was!'

'Wildfire's going to burn everything out there in a day or two, Bagley was only getting in first. He *likes* to kill.' He folded his sleeping bag and crammed it into his big pack, tightening the straps. 'You say other people are losing their memories?'

She came back to the edge of the sunken chamber where they had slept that second night.

'They can't remember *before*,' she hissed. 'There have been top secret reports. Listen Sissons, maybe I am being neurotic, even paranoiac but would you do me a favor? Would you —' They heard a shout from outside. Her hand reached out to clutch at his shoulder. 'Don't let him kill me — *please!*'

Chapter 5

There was a slight frown on the boyish face of the burly young man who stood in the bell-shaped mouth of the glass tunnel.

On either side of him, women passed carrying grass baskets full of earth and stones. Gangs of men in gray fatigues were leveling a stretch of newly-dug earth ahead of the glass tunnel.

There were no badges of rank or insignia of any kind on his green fatigue jacket, but when he stepped down from the glass tunnel, a black-uniformed guard swung his rifle into the saluting position.

Steane waited for a break in the line of women and then came to stand shoulder to shoulder with the guard.

‘We don’t give that salute any more Doyle,’ he muttered.

‘Sorry, sir — just a habit.’

‘Where’s Oppenheim?’

‘He’s up at the top of the track, sir.’

Deputy Commandant Andrew Steane shielded his eyes with his hand. At the far end of the newly-dug scar of flat earth, teams of men in gray fatigues were tearing at a layer of dead shoots and stones with picks and shovels, opening up the line which the glass tunnel would follow all the way to the distant blurs of giant bushes.

‘When was your last emergency drill, Doyle?’

‘Yesterday morning, sir.’

‘How did it go?’

The guard shrugged. ‘Crows would have got half of them, sir.’

A shout warned them to get out of the way and they turned to see a dazzle of sunlight reflected from a cylinder of glass being carried shoulder-high by two lines of construction workers.

Oppenheim appeared from the digging gangs, distinguished only by the crispness of his gray fatigues.

‘Making good progress, Oppenheim?’ Steane shouted across the level stretch of earth.

‘We’re ahead of the target by three days,’ Oppenheim said defensively as he came across to join them. He cupped his hands round his mouth and shouted at the digging teams. ‘Section layers!’

The two lines of men, looking like pallbearers, waited for the gang

leader's command, the section of glass tunnel towering above their heads on a framework of wooden poles. The digging gangs dropped their implements and came running, some finding longer wooden poles on which the new section would be rolled into place at the end of the tunnel.

Steane looked back along the line of curved glass towards the shadow of the Net, which still covered the Colony's original fields. 'Everybody knows how well you're doing, Oppenheim,' he said. 'Commandant Khomich wants me to convey his appreciation to your people...

'But...?'

'I'm just a little concerned about safety procedures. Control says there's a breeze...' Steane stooped to pick up a fragment of dead leaf and threw it in the air, watching it spin to the ground at a slight angle. 'This drought can't last for ever.'

'There's always a movement of air in the morning,' Oppenheim said irritably. 'If those so-called weather experts ever took the trouble to come out here—'

'Let it down!' shouted the gang leader.

The two lines of men staggered momentarily as they began to slide the platform off their shoulders. Men from the digging teams shoved the heavier poles crosswise under the platform. Steane screwed up his eyes as the heavy curved glass flashed sunlight in his face. All around, women earth-carriers were squatting on the rough ground that soon would be attacked by whole armies of fieldworkers.

The glass cylinder sagged at its narrower end as the two lines of men let it sink onto the heavy poles.

Oppenheim grunted angrily. 'I wish you people would stop bothering me with irrelevancies,' he grumbled. 'I need more men.'

'You won't get them, so don't lose any of the men you have already,' Steane said patiently. He looked round and caught the armed guard listening to their conversation. 'Shouldn't you be watching the sky for crows, Doyle?'

'The sun's hurting my eyes, sir,' Doyle complained.

'Would you like a spell with a shovel? Give your eyes a rest.'

'I'll be all night, sir,' Doyle said quickly, turning away to squint upwards.

'What's the hold-up?' Oppenheim shouted at the men swarming round the glass cylinder.

Steane touched him on the shoulder. 'I'd like to speak to them now.'

'I have a target to maintain!'

‘You’re three days ahead of your target, Oppenheim.’

Steane nodded and Oppenheim reluctantly followed him until they were out of earshot. Steane scanned the dazzling blue sky. From here, Glasshouse was a shining, rectangular mountain. ‘Things have changed, Ernest,’ he said quietly. ‘Our people don’t have to be shouted at. They were consulted about these targets and they voted to work extra hours. You—’

‘Consultation?’ Oppenheim sneered. ‘Amazing how they always vote the right way.’

‘They work with real enthusiasm now, don’t they?’

‘Yes – from fear. Fear of hunger and fear of punishment.’

‘Nobody gets punished unless by decision of their own group.’

‘Look, Steane, I’m in favor of the new system, it *does* get more work out of them but don’t give me all that crap about worker participation. Industrial democracy! Even the workers don’t believe that bullshit. We set the targets and we manipulate the committees and we enforce the decisions and we run the Detention Compound. Tell me this — suppose I’m three days behind the target because my gangs have voted to slack off, will I be promoted?’

Steane scanned the clear blue sky. ‘I know it’s going to be a long process to change old attitudes, Ernest. As you say, authority still rests with the top echelons.’ He turned slowly on the sallow-faced construction chief. ‘In your case, *I* am authority. If one worker is lost through negligent emergency procedures you will be transferred to water-carrying in the vegetable fields. And that isn’t bullshit, Ernest.’

To his surprise, Oppenheim was smiling.

‘I just don’t like doubletalk, Steane. You want to make your speech now?’

Steane came to where the teams of construction workers had gathered round the new section of glass cylinder. He tried to look interested as Oppenheim showed him how the narrower, straight end of the section would be rammed home into the bell-shaped mouth of the previous section, the overlap making the glass tunnel watertight. The new section was one of those with entry holes, like a series of down-turned pipes designed to give access to fieldworkers but not to insects.

Looking back along the straight line that ran glinting to the Net and the towering shimmer of Glasshouse, he saw the regularly spaced surveillance bubbles, in which guards would be posted once the rough ground had been turned into fields.

As always he marveled at the technical ingenuity of men like

Oppenheim – and as always, there was the nagging doubt. Cynicism, instant hysteria, all attempts at social progress dismissed as bullshit. What had happened to *faith*?

Hardly had Oppenheim gestured for him to address the waiting team when his recall bleeper emitted a three-tone signal. He smiled at the sweating faces.

‘I just want to tell you that the General Committee thinks you’re doing a great job here,’ he said. The bleeper tone sounded again. He shook his head. ‘There must be a crisis back in the big bubble: probably some overworked executive panicking over his impotency problem.’

As he listened to their laughter, men and women alike, he despised himself for courting cheap popularity. He ignored Oppenheim’s knowing smile. Oppenheim was right, the Colony’s new democracy was only an illusion — but people had always preferred illusion to truth. Maybe, in time, the illusion would become reality.

He was listening to an older woman’s complaint about the fruit juice allotment, when a guard came hurrying out of the tunnel carrying a transceiver.

‘Control wants to speak to you, sir.’ He reached for the radio but the guard frowned at him and said quietly, ‘Restricted information, sir.’

He was climbing into the glinting tunnel when the accident happened. Levering the new section onto flat earth, the construction gangs overbalanced the glass cylinder. It toppled over, crushing one man face down into dry earth and breaking another worker’s legs.

Hearing the urgent shouts, Steane looked back but saw only a dazzle of sunlight from curved glass walls.

He took the transceiver from the guard. ‘Steane calling Control.’

‘Are you on your own, sir?’ came the duty controller’s voice through heavy static. Steane nodded at the guard, who strode away along the curve of the tunnel.

‘You can speak now, Control,’ he said into the black casing.

‘There’s been an accident, sir. Patrol Leader Norman has reported the loss of the helicopter and the death of Pilot Broxholme. He also reports an animal sighting that fits the description of a weasel, sir...’

Chapter 6

Sissons licked his index finger again and held it up towards big, pale leaves rustling gently in the breeze. He frowned, aligning the well-thumbed oilcloth map with his view out past the grooved trunks of ground-elder across a panorama of blurred yellows and browns.

‘It’s from the west.’

Bagley shrugged. ‘Breeze from anywhere’s welcome.’

‘Didn’t Control mention it?’

‘We break radio silence to talk about a little *breeze*? Anyway, you can’t reach Control from here.’

‘Losey’s on high ground; he said nothing about a breeze. From the west?’

‘He gave us the rendezvous position,’ Bagley snapped. ‘We have to make the Stones by mid-afternoon and we’re wasting time so let’s get going, Sissons.’

Sissons saw Kirsten Shadd staring at him. The sun had burned her cheeks and started her nose peeling. Dirkovitch was helping her to pull on her big pack. She was taller than Dirkovitch, taller than any of them, too tall and maybe a bit eccentric but she didn’t look crazy, not in full daylight.

He turned on Bagley. The patrol leader was rubbing gray repellent ointment on his cheeks, making his red-rimmed eyes look as if they were staring out of a mask. ‘A breeze from the west could mean a wind from the west? We usually get rain from a west wind, don’t we?’ Sissons said patiently.

‘We haven’t had rain for three months.’

‘The drought can’t last for ever.’

‘You scared of getting wet?’

Sissons shook his head and stared at the map of the park. ‘No, I’m scared they get Go for Wildfire while we’re halfway through that jungle.’

Bagley snorted. ‘Don’t be stupid. A wind could push the fire towards Glasshouse.’

‘Glasshouse is surrounded by open fields and bare concrete.’

Bagley raised his chin, rubbing gray ointment on his neck. ‘Are you saying they’d casually start a fire knowing we would be burned alive?’

Kirsten Shadd pushed Dirkovitch away and came towards them. 'What are you saying about burning us alive?' she demanded.

Sissons ignored her, his eyes fixed on Bagley's heavily-lined face. 'How many thousand manhours to clear that section once it's wet and green again, Bagley?'

'How the hell would I know?'

'I bet they know in the big bubble!'

Bagley put away his ointment tin. 'You're getting jumpy, Siss, you've been out here too long.'

'Yeah, and I've stayed alive by out-thinking those bastards. Three months' drought gave them their best chance of clearing this whole section in one swoop.'

Bagley grinned. 'You got busted down from patrol leader and after this patrol you're going back to Compound duties – that's out-thinking them? I'm glad I'm stupid.'

Sissons held down his temper. 'Bagley, suppose we're halfway through that goddamn jungle when they see rain coming?'

'They'll lift us out.'

'They're going to waste time finding an open space for us to rendezvous with the helicopter? Those guys are the jumpy ones, Bagley, you know that as well as I do.'

'Yeah. So?'

'Call them on the radio. Explain there's a west wind – give them a chance to think about it before we get lost in the middle of the jungle.'

'You know the orders about breaking radio silence. I'm going to tell them sorry but Sissons has gone paranoiac about a *breeze*? We're moving out.'

Sissons grabbed his jacket. 'We're not moving anywhere!'

'Get your hands off me!'

Dirkovitch tried to come between them. Kirsten Shadd threw down her pack and started taking off her belt harness. 'I'm not taking a single step until I know what Sissons means,' she said firmly.

'Why don't you shut up and get your pack on?' Bagley growled, pulling himself free from Sissons. Her cheeks reddened.

'I'm going to report you when we get back, Bagley,' she hissed, her eyes glaring neurotically. 'I'm sure it's not your orders to waste ammunition on harmless butterflies and hedgehogs. Is it?' She smiled triumphantly. 'We'll see who goes to the Compound.'

'You stupid bitch!' Bagley looked ready to hit her.

Sissons pushed her away and shoved the map in front of Bagley.

‘Never mind her, Bagley. Look! We could be halfway to the Stones when they see rainclouds. It’d take us half a day to get clear of that jungle on foot. Wildfire means they can push the tunnel network as far as the Pipes by winter. They’ll have all that ground ready for planting in the spring. If they wait for us to get out the rain could saturate the vegetation. You think they’d risk six months’ delay for our sake?’

Dirkovitch looked doubtfully at Sissons. ‘We all know they’re screwy but...’

Sissons snorted. ‘You think those twitchy maniacs back in the big bubble would hesitate? One raincloud on the horizon and it’s Go for Wildfire. We’ll roast to a shrivel with the bugs and over tonight’s hot meals they’ll be calling it the price of progress!’

Bagley pointed at Kirsten Shadd. ‘She’s one of them. Those bastards look after their own.’

‘Unless she’s been marked out,’ Sissons said quietly. Bagley frowned. ‘She’s got some crazy notion she wasn’t supposed to come back from this patrol. She thinks—’

‘For chrissake, Siss,’ Bagley shouted, ‘she’s just some neurotic broad from Glasshouse. They’ve all got fantasies of being raped by red and black brutes, if they aren’t fucking lesbians! She’s what’s running this Colony!’

Sissons moved quickly, ripping the radio pack off Bagley’s belt. ‘That’s just what I’ve been saying, Bagley. So we don’t let them burn us to death! You going to call Losey?’

Bagley looked genuinely puzzled. ‘What could I say to him? Hey, Losey, you planning to roast us alive? You think he’d tell us? Give me the transceiver, Siss, she’s got you as neurotic as herself. Losey wouldn’t start Wildfire with us out here.’

‘Losey?’ Dirkovitch spat. ‘That bastard would light a fire under a crippled child and call it a mild jest!’

Bagley took a step towards Sissons, his hand out. ‘Give me the transceiver.’ Sissons moved back, shaking his head.

Dirkovitch tried to reason with Bagley. ‘Tell them we’re reporting a change in weather conditions, maybe they haven’t noticed there’s a wind. I mean, what’s the big problem, Bagley?’

The patrol leader’s mean, narrow face seemed to relax. ‘Maybe you’re right, why don’t we—’

He moved without warning, dragging the rifle off his shoulder.

Kirsten Shadd shouted something and grabbed at his arm. Bagley jabbed the butt into her stomach and she fell to her knees, making

retching noises. Bagley aimed the rifle at Sissons. 'Give me that radio,' he snarled.

She threw her arms round his knees. Staggering sideways, Bagley tried to smash the butt down on her head. Sissons dropped the radio pack and rushed at him, getting his hands on the rifle.

Kirsten Shadd was kicked clear as Sissons and Bagley – wrestled round in a circle, both holding the rifle. Bagley tried to butt Sissons on the face with his forehead. Sissons jabbed his knee up at Bagley's groin. When his boot came down it crunched through the brittle black casing of the transceiver.

Dirkovitch hesitated, waiting for a chance to come between them. Suddenly he saw Kirsten Shadd coming behind Bagley. She had a rifle. He shouted.

Sissons saw her over Bagley's shoulder. He realized too late what she was going to do. He tried to swing Bagley away from her, shouting a warning. Bagley thought it was a trick and rammed his boot into Sissons's leg.

She jabbed the barrel into Bagley's back.

Bagley did not have time to look round.

Sissons was already diving to the ground as a nylon-tipped bullet punched a clean hole through Bagley's OD jacket and whined off up the slope to ricochet against a stone.

Bagley swallowed, looking down at his chest. His eyes widened in disbelief. Blood spurted from his red and black jacket in a long, clean spout. He made a choking sound.

Blood came bubbling out of his mouth and he buckled at the knees.

Sissons rolled away, narrowly escaping the falling body.

Dirkovitch stared incredulously.

'What the hell...?'

Steane was known to have an almost inhuman control over his temper but at that moment his hands itched to hold a heavy club.

Instead he rested his forehead on his clenched fists, as if in prayer. 'Let me get it straight, Norman,' he said slowly and deliberately. 'In firing at an unidentified mammal, you and your men slaughtered Pilot Broxholme and wrecked our only serviceable helicopter?'

The disheveled patrol leader tried to suppress a twitch in his cheek. 'We didn't wreck it, sir. The engine got shot up... sir.'

Chapter 7

Steane's voice was a carefully controlled rasp. He gestured at the wallmap of the park. 'Show me the location of this incident.'

The field scout limped across the room. His dirt-engrained fingernail found a point southwest of Glasshouse. Steane was so close he could smell insect-repellent and sweat from the red and black OD suit. He stared at Norman's twitching cheek muscle, finding himself able to anticipate the little spasms that gave his lips a sideways jerk.

'It's within sight of the walled garden, sir,' Norman said. He wiped his brow with a hairy forearm. 'We were coming back to the machine and this animal appeared. We didn't have time to...'

'How much time would you have needed?'

Norman looked away, snorting with exasperation. 'You're not in a warm office out there. You don't have time to make multi-option analyses.' He shrugged. 'I'll reserve my defense for the enquiry board.'

Steane used his middle finger to jab at Norman's shoulder. 'You might not ever get in front of a board, Norman.' His finger stabbed again and again, forcing Norman back. 'Six of you allowed some animal to get between you and the helicopter, where you'd left Pilot Broxholme unarmed and unguarded? You blasted off in such a panic none of you even hit the animal but—'

'I don't know if we hit or not but it ran away. Would you stop pushing me?'

Steane clenched his fists. 'Next time I'll break your arm! Describe this animal!'

'Reddish brown, something like a rat maybe but not a rat, too slim and long... whiskers, I saw whiskers, it was moving pretty fast. I'd say it would have to be a weasel, you know, slim neck, round ears—'

'All right, it was a weasel. So six fully experienced field scouts fired off – how many rounds?'

'The ammunition count showed eighty-six, sir.'

'Eighty-six rounds?' Steane went back to his desk. 'Eighty-six rounds!'

'It was in direct line for chrissake!'

'Look, Norman, I know the situation you were in. We've never had a sighting of anything resembling a weasel in the park but we all

remember the fox so let's accept that somehow a weasel has found a way over the wall. I know how fast those brutes can move—'

'Do you?' Norman snapped. 'I wasn't aware you'd seen any service in the Wilds... sir.'

'That's true, Norman. Tell you what. You go on up to Tier Four and you explain to the commandant how you blasted off eighty-six rounds without killing some animal but managing to slaughter our senior pilot and leave our one serviceable machine wrecked out there half a day's march from Glasshouse. The Wilds? You'll wish you'd never left the goddamn Wilds! Go on, Norman – I'll be happy to change places with you.'

Norman shook his head.

Steane picked up the phone. 'Tell the commandant's secretary I'm coming up, I have to see the commandant – yes, *now!*' He put down the phone. 'Get yourself cleaned up, Patrol Leader.'

'Am I under arrest?'

Steane pointed to the door. 'Go and change your socks, Norman. You lost the goddamn helicopter, you can get it back.'

'It won't fly, sir.'

'All right, carry it on your bloody back!' Steane roared. Then he rubbed his forehead. 'Standby for further orders,' he said wearily.

He gave himself a few moments to rehearse the interview and then left his office. He tried to feel some sympathy for the patrol leader but it did not survive his growing tension as he came off the stairs onto Tier Four of the wooden building known as Control. Security guards passed him without question as he approached the office of the man who had come to dominate the lives of ten thousand people in a way that transcended mere rank or authority.

When he entered the crowded reception office, the commandant's secretary was emerging from the ante-room that led to the inner sanctum. Yuill, a tall, stooped man with the kind of neuter face that would never need a razor, gestured for Steane to push through a deputation of machinist section leaders, all in clean fatigues and all watching everything that moved in the reception room as they waited nervously for audience.

Some called it democracy, some called it the Chinese policy, but for all the upheavals and changes in the political structure of the Colony, reality still prevailed this close to the source of power. He could feel their eyes on the back of his neck as Yuill ushered him into the bare, gloomy antechamber.

The cadaverous secretary closed the door and leaned his stooped shoulders against it, sighing wearily. Yuill portrayed himself as a man of reason trying to maintain sanity under immense burdens that were too important to share. He was a creep and he made the skin crawl but he was a fact of life.

‘Andrew, when we were in *our* most unpopular period, I, paradoxically, enjoyed this job, even if I lived in constant fear that one faction or another was preparing to put a rope round my neck. *We* never had delegations to placate in those days. People came through those doors in a state of terror — and very easy it was to handle them...’ He smiled, as if they were old comrades, and then he came close and placed a cold, red hand, on Steane’s shoulder.

Steane nodded sympathetically. He did not flinch. Even as number two in the Colony hierarchy he needed Yuill’s goodwill, if only to guarantee easy access to the next and final room. ‘Is he in a good mood?’ he asked bluntly, as befitted the utterly loyal but outspoken young soldier. He had no ambitions of power for himself, everybody knew that.

Yuill took his arm. ‘You know the commandant – a thin tolerance of lesser mortals at the best of times.’

‘Pity — I have a small disaster to report.’ He told Yuill quickly about the fiasco that had wrecked the helicopter. The secretary winced sympathetically, squeezing his arm.

‘I’ll be ready to break your fall. By the way, have you read the psychiatric report?’

‘I only had time to glance at it.’

Yuill frowned. ‘Don’t say *that*. Say you need time to consider its full implications. *We* are confused by it. *We* gave the people what they wanted and *we* did not expect them to respond with mass irrationality. He steered Steane towards the door. ‘Don’t commit yourself. One wrong word and I fear the slumbering volcano may emit a rumble!’

Yuill gave him a mocking bow and opened the door. Even as he returned the bow, Steane promised himself that he would have the creep working on a construction gang at the earliest opportunity.

As Yuill closed the door, Steane took a deep breath, reminding himself he was not some minor committee man here to beg a favor or plead forgiveness.

The broad-shouldered figure was unmistakable, even in partial silhouette against a narrow gap in the window curtains.

‘Steane, sir.’

The massive, cropped head did not turn.

‘I have to report the possible presence of a new predator in the park, sir, a weasel. The patrol which sighted it panicked and wrecked the helicopter, sir.’ Still the great head did not turn. ‘Pilot Broxholme was killed accidentally, sir.’ Steane began to feel angry, insulted by the silent power routine. ‘I propose to sound a red alert, sir, we need all fieldworkers under cover, I also propose to muster a large detachment of guards to recover the machine... do I have your authority, sir?’

The burly figure moved at last.

There was no monumental rage.

‘Yes, sound an alert, Steane,’ came the harsh but strangely calm voice of Andrei Ilyanovich Khomich, Commandant of Colony One. ‘You can also give Section Leader Losey the order to commence Operation Wildfire. Now. Immediately!’

‘Wildfire?’ Steane frowned. ‘I’ve just been out at the tunnel construction — there’s a west wind, it could blow the flames—’

‘I am counting on it blowing the flames,’ Khomich turned from the window to face Steane. There was a look of triumph on the broad peasant face with the small blue eyes.

‘We can’t lift Losey’s detachment out, sir, the helicopter was abandoned.’

‘Losey is perfectly safe.’

Brilliantly polished boots hammered on bare planks as Khomich advanced quickly. For a terrifying moment, Steane thought he was about to suffer a physical attack, as he had seen so many people attacked by this tank of a man.

But Khomich was smiling. For the first time, Steane saw a large map of the park pinned out on the floor.

Without hesitation, the boots crashed down on stiff paper. Khomich drew lines with his toecaps, dragging the paper and then tearing it, lines that swept all across the middle section towards the top right corner.

‘The wind from here will sweep everything in its path as far as the wall, here. It will clear the Wilds once and for all. Not just a few square yards for cultivation — the whole northwest area! Look!’

He grabbed at Steane and the young deputy commandant found himself being pulled onto the map.

‘Look! The lake — those trees — the flames will burn right across to the house!’

‘Don’t you think that could be highly dangerous, sir. I mean...’

‘Dangerous?’ Khomich almost screamed with delight. ‘Not dangerous

— *fatal*. A wall of living death!’

‘Why, sir?’ Steane asked, trying to give himself time to think.

‘Why?’ Khomich smiled slyly and let his boot slide slowly over the shiny paper until he was standing in the top right corner. ‘Scorched earth, an old Russian maneuver. I should have thought of it months ago — but, of course, there was no drought.’ He frowned at Steane’s slowness. ‘Don’t you see? We wipe out Gudenian’s hunting grounds. They may escape the flames but we’ll drive those savages right to the wall. They’ll face starvation. Then we simply round them up. We’ll never have another chance like it. Go on, man, sound the gongs, sound the gongs and then give Losey the signal!’

Steane watched a shiny boot tear through shiny paper. Khomich was intoxicated with delight, liable to kick to death anybody who frustrated his return to simple, unadulterated violence. Steane felt numb.

Somewhere on that torn map was Kirsten Shadd.

Could he let her burn to death to save himself from the unimaginable fury of those small blue eyes?

Chapter 8

They moved out to the last of the towering ground-elder trunks, adjusting their field hats to shade their faces as they met the full glare of sunshine, under a sky so vast and impenetrably blue it made Kirsten Shadd feel she was at the bottom of a deep ocean.

Sissons scanned the open slope that led down into the dying jungle. ‘We’ll stand out on that yellow clay. Keep a watch for crows and keep moving.’

Dirkovitch eased his shoulders under the extra weight of Bagley’s equipment. Orders said that no usable item must be left, down to a man’s socks. A naked corpse was of interest only to the insects, equipment was in short supply.

‘What happens if we run into any of Gudenian’s people?’

Kirsten Shadd caught the last two words. ‘What about Gudenian’s people?’

Sissons unclipped the metal Prod from his belt. ‘We’re going to make the Sandpit by high-sun no matter what. If anything gets in front of us we blast it out of our way. Okay?’ He gave her a vicious look. ‘Don’t be afraid, Shadd, I’m going to take good care of *you*. I want you back there at Glasshouse alive and well so you can tell them what happened to Bagley.’

Even then he was partly conscious of something suspicious about her, a nagging feeling that she should have been more scared, or more neurotic. But not as composed as she now appeared. Maybe killing a man, stripping him naked and covering his body with rocks was what these Glasshouse maniacs secretly craved, he told himself bitterly.

When they burst out from the shelter of the big green plants she cowered, all the time anticipating the sudden swoop of predatory birds.

She saw the group as they would look from that limitless blue sky: three red and black dots running on a vast landscape, puny and insignificant. The orchestrated pandemonium of insect noise flooded through her brain, confusing her senses, her eyes seeing an empty world of blurred yellows and browns ... her ears tuned into life in its unimaginable millions, teeming and seething, primeval.

The murderous pace that came easily to the two field scouts soon had

her gasping for every breath. Sissons led them diagonally across the slope of baked clay in quick springs between clumps of weeds that had tenaciously survived three months of drought. She heard nothing now but the rasp of air in her throat.

The sudden eruption of a big green grasshopper zinging off into the sky made her stumble.

Dirkovitch steadied her. His solid, weather-hardened face was tinged with a coal-black stubble that made him look wolfish. For a moment she *felt* what it must be like to be masculine and naive.

Dirkovitch kept his hand on her arm, loping steadily beside her, her arm feeling soft and delicate against his hand. Bagley had called her a manhater, Bagley had only recently come back from Detention duties and he said the Colony was full of them nowadays, women who didn't like being women and who were taking revenge on men for having treated them like women.

And Bagley was dead now to prove it!

She'd killed him and if they weren't hung for that they'd be sentenced to years in the Diggings for disobeying orders... but the feel of her arm sent a tingle across the back of his neck.

They came to a crouch in the shadow of an outcrop of low plants with coarse, waxy leaves. Sissons hit her on the shoulder when she made to touch her waterflask.

'I'll say when you drink,' he growled.

She rested her forehead on her knees. She heard blurred voices but when she looked they were not speaking. She told herself sharply to stop being neurotic — then the other image flashed across her mind's eye, the zig-zag coil of shiny death...

'Everybody goes through different stages out here,' she remembered Sissons saying on her first night in the Wilds, in the cave under the slope of yellow clay. 'First you're scared to death of everything. Glasshouse is designed to make you forget what you were *before* – out here you see your first butterfly and you *remember*...

'Then you get a little more confident. Our weapons can kill anything that moves — they killed a fox, didn't they? So you become over-confident and that's when you're at maximum risk...'

Bagley had enjoyed terrifying her. 'Christ, *plants* can kill you. Stumble against a nettle stalk and those little spikes will break off at the tip and shove enough acid into you to burn through your veins. And those big

black crows — they'll zoom down so fast that you're being pulled to pieces before you get off a single shot!

Sissons had been the one who impressed her most from the start. 'Out here you stay edgy and alert the whole time,' he said. 'It's like being on a highwire above a tank of crocodiles: you never lose concentration, you want to know *why* a leaf is moving, you never put your foot down without checking it won't land on a big red centipede.

'Flower perfume can send you to sleep, so avoid flowers ...when you can't hear insects buzzing, that's when to take cover, when you hear silence. They pick up vibrations we can't hear. But you'll hear the silence all right, that kind of silence is *deafening*...

And they'd enjoyed telling her what they thought of Glasshouse. 'Ask any field scout,' Bagley had growled. 'The real danger comes from you creeps back in the big bubble. You hate the Wilds and you hate us for knowing how to survive. You think we're halfway to being animals ourselves!'

'What about Gudenian's people?' she'd asked.

That made Sissons and Dirkovitch smile, she didn't know why. 'They've killed a few of us red and blacks,' Dirkovitch said cheerfully.

Sissons had patted her on the shoulder. 'You'll be okay if they jump us, Assistant Secretary Shadd, they're short of women. They'll cut our throats and stake us out for the ants — we're still Detention guards as far as they're concerned.'

'They get hold of her maybe she'll wish they had cut her throat,' Bagley growled. 'Why the hell Khomich doesn't send a flame-thrower detachment to wipe those renegades out beats me.'

She'd known then. Bagley had selected himself to be killed.

High overhead, far above the yellowing canopy of twisting bindweed and dying branches, birds chattered through the endless buzz of the insects. The three small figures in red and black stripes waded chest-high through dead leaves, past rock-hard plates of white fungus jutting from the massive trunks of towering bushes.

They froze when something long and black was disturbed from almost under their feet by Sissons's slashing Prod. Dirkovitch grabbed at his rifle strap but it was only a millipede, its shiny, segmented body harmlessly snaking away from them on legs that undulated like rippling curtains.

'Pity, isn't it?' she whispered. They both looked at her. She grimaced

apologetically. 'They're not nearly so repulsive at close-range. I mean, they're like individuals with minds of their own. And they're all going to be burned to death.'

'Progress,' Dirkovitch muttered ironically, his arm making a wide sweep of the vaulted gloom of the jungle. 'Factory farming, glass tunnels, death to all God's living creatures except us!'

Sissons gave her another of his vicious looks. 'You killed a man this morning! Now you're getting sentimental about the goddamn bugs?'

'I thought he was going to kill you,' she protested, but Sissons was already striding ahead.

Dirkovitch warned her with a glance to keep up and keep quiet. She was pushing quickly through chest-high leaves when they were hit by the stench of rotting flesh.

Holding gauze filter pads over their noses and mouths, they cautiously emerged into the trampled clearing in the center of which lay the spiny mound of the dead hedgehog. She had a glimpse of something soft and white moving across the hairy muzzle.

Skirting the decomposing carcass, her eye was caught by something pale among the dead stalks and she remembered it from the previous time they'd come that way, a discarded skin of dry scales.

It reminded her of something but Sissons was hurrying them across the clearing and it was driven from her mind by a sudden, close-up view of seething streams of big white maggots crawling in and out of the loathsome hole that had been the soft underbelly of the hedgehog.

The vision came to her again as they brushed through hanging tendrils, the same zig-zag pattern running along a coil of shiny scales.

Scales!

She hesitated, looking back across the clearing. She knew now the significance of the dry, discarded skin and of the zigzag pattern — not a neurotic fantasy but a perfectly logical example of the brain making a connection from the data bank known as memory. She had to decide very quickly and she decided to say nothing.

By the time it was safe to put the gauze mask back in her belt pouch they were struggling up a steep slope through brittle clumps of dry, interwoven stalks. It was darker now on the floor of the jungle, yet for the first time she could see patches of blue above and ahead. Her boots scraped on stone through a layer of dead white lichen and the slope became so steep they had to grab at trailing creeper to pull themselves up. The buzz of insects came from behind now and she heard a steady sighing and whistling of wind.

The jagged curve of brown glass rose out of the lichen like a sudden threat. They climbed to the left to avoid shards of broken glass and found themselves facing a wall of rough, red stone. Their eyes traveled along a line of crumbling mortar broken here and there by rusting iron spikes. They knew what the broken glass and the red stone represented and for a long moment they had no need to use words.

‘Help me up onto that spike,’ Dirkovitch muttered, pulling off his big pack.

When Sissons carefully parted the last hanging tendrils, they were on a flat roadway of red brick. They emerged cautiously into the breeze, looking across a dazzling expanse of wind-rippled sand.

In the far distance, where sand met sky, she sensed rather than saw a vast blur of shapes, a blinding glare making it impossible to keep her eyes on the horizon.

Sissons walked to the edge of the brick roadway and crouched, peering down a sheer drop to dirty sand strewn with broken glass and rusting metal tubes. When he looked up, she was standing over him, a dark silhouette against dazzling blue.

‘It’s a desert,’ she said quietly.

He had a curious feeling then that this tall, awkward woman had some hidden power. Her hysteria and neurotic fears seemed to have been left far behind, back there where insects would be gathering round the stones that covered Bagley’s naked body.

‘Once we cross that sand we’ll be safe from any fire,’ he said.

‘But...?’

Dirkovitch came towards them, scratching his stubbled jaw. ‘So what do we do, Siss?’

‘Don’t look at me all the time, you stupid bastard!’

‘They’ll hang me, won’t they?’ she said.

Sissons shrugged. ‘You know those creeps better than we do.’

‘I hate Glasshouse,’ she said fervently.

‘That breeze is getting stronger.’

Sissons made up his mind. ‘Okay, we’ll go straight across. To hell with it.’ He jumped without warning and landed on all-fours below them. Looking up, he waved impatiently. ‘Throw down the packs.’

Dirkovitch hesitated, looking first at her, then down at Sissons. ‘We won’t find any water this side of the lake, Siss... we could run into Gudenian’s people.’

‘Come on, jump!’

Sissons waited until they were dragging on the packs again in the

shadow of the high wall. He shoved a rifle at her. 'You'll be okay,' he growled, 'they don't kill women.'

She told them about the dry snakeskin then, but Dirkovitch merely shrugged. 'Snakes will burn up just like everything else...'

Chapter 9

A thin black fork made delicate rapier thrusts from between slender teeth and narrow lips. Eyes tinged red glinted in deep shadow under a massive overhang of concrete. The forked tongue tasted the air again and again, catching scent molecules to be instantly analyzed by a sensory organ that was both nose and brain.

The flat, scaly head moved rhythmically from side to side. With a fixed, unblinking stare, the eyes scanned an expanse of sun-hardened sand.

Sliding on the tips of horny ventral plates, the female viper slithered out from the shadow of the overhang across the sand. She disappeared into shadow again and then came coiling up into the sunshine on the concrete plateau, moving in a series of looping muscular contractions until she came to rest in sunlight on a patch of concrete between stones that were not stones but man-made shapes of faded blue plastic.

Motionless but for the darting black tongue, the viper rested to let her body soak up heat from the warm concrete. Gradually her blood temperature began to rise, dissipating her night sluggishness, bringing the energy that would trigger the day's hunt for prey.

A lone black crow came to rest on a framework of rusting metal whose geometrical shadows moved with the sun, transversing the black zig-zag markings that ran down the viper's back, from a dark cross on her broad head to the dull red tip of her tail...

Chapter 10

The first clang of iron rang out from the shimmering edifice of Glasshouse as the golden stalk of wheat lurched in the sky and began to topple slowly away from the towering plantation.

By the time the heavy head of grains crashed onto stubble and dry earth, the harvesting team was already running past black-uniformed guards who screamed and yelled, poised to run themselves but knowing the punishment they could expect if one fieldworker was reported missing.

The clanging of iron bars on iron triangles rose to a crescendo, driving chattering sparrows into the blue sky, bringing fieldworkers in streams that converged and raced to reach the shadow of the Net and the safety of the massive glass building. Tools were dropped, workmates elbowed aside as the gongs rang out the red alert. Panic was no longer an offense but a life or death command.

Black-uniformed guards kicked at stragglers, driving the streaming masses with blows and shouts. Brutality was kindness when the gongs clanged. Somewhere a shot was fired and the sky immediately reverberated with muffled wingbeats as big wood pigeons shot like projectiles towards the safety of distant trees.

‘That was a shot,’ Steane said angrily as he came back into the room where the map still lay torn on the floor.

Khomich nodded, the massive head looking too heavy even for his thick neck. ‘People panic what else do you expect?’ he said calmly. ‘Have you given Losey the signal?’

Steane walked to the desk and unfolded an undamaged map of the great park. He spread it out and smoothed the ridges of shiny paper. ‘Would you look at this, sir?’

Khomich had his hands clasped behind his back. He seemed preoccupied. ‘So? A map — Yuill nags at me for tearing up maps...’

‘Losey’s group is there, sir.’ Steane pointed. ‘When he starts the fire the wind will take it west.’

‘That is the plan.’

‘I have a small group somewhere here, sir,’ Steane’s finger rested in the middle of a section marked by diagonal lines of red dots. ‘They’re due to rendezvous here at the Stones by mid-afternoon.’

‘Lift them out by helicopter.’

Steane waited for a second, staring at the map. ‘As I told you, sir, the only working machine we had is now here, south of Glasshouse.’

‘I remember. I will leave their punishment to you.’ He smiled. ‘In the old days they would have been flogged but we have adopted liberal ways now, eh?’

Steane felt his heart pounding. Khomich smiling was more dangerous than sweating gelignite!

‘I’ve spoken to Losey. Unfortunately he cannot establish radio contact with the small detachment and I can only presume they are at low-level in the overgrown area designated for burning, so I—’

‘What is this detachment?’ Khomich asked, blinking as if coming out of a dreamy spell.

Steane stood back from the map. There were several ways he could handle this but loyalty and boyish naivety had never failed before.

‘I was only going to tell you about this if it succeeded, Khomich.’ He spoke firmly yet without aggression, as if they were equals. ‘I had an idea of how we could infiltrate Gudenian’s people – it’s information we’re short of, firsthand intelligence. You remember we sent three field scouts pretending to be escapees from the Detention Compound?’

Khomich nodded. ‘They didn’t pretend so good or they would not have had their throats cut.’

He senses treachery, Steane thought. He is already evaluating the odds against my having turned against him.

‘Their cover story wasn’t strong enough.’

‘I told you to break an arm or two. Who would believe men without a bruise or a broken bone had been in the Compound?’

The matter of fact tone was Khomich at his most dangerous.

‘This time I selected a group with a built-in certainty of interpersonal hostility,’ Steane said, gradually acquiring the reckless courage of having no escape route. ‘I picked a demoted patrol leader who was informed he would be returned to Compound duties after this patrol. I picked a patrol leader who is notoriously brutal. If they didn’t come to blows of their own volition, the individual I selected for desertion is clever enough to stir up trouble. Ideally I want one or more individuals preferring the risk of deserting to Gudenian’s people to the certainty of punishment on the patrol’s return.’

Khomich nodded appreciatively. ‘Somebody had to be killed?’

‘There had to be genuine violence. More important, my infiltrator had to be accompanied by at least one witness who had no idea he was taking part in subterfuge — a field guard with every motivation for desertion. That would convince Gudenian.’ He bent over the map, pointing at the section marked for clearance. ‘The group is somewhere here — the Jungle they call it — heading north. That is why we have to delay Wildfire.’ He looked round and saw Khomich staring at him, ignoring the map. He straightened up.

Khomich rubbed the flat of his hand forward over his cropped head, pressing down stiff hairs, grimacing contemplatively. ‘And how was your infiltrator supposed to communicate with us?’

‘Gudenian’s people must have radios from previous parties of field patrols they have ambushed. One way or another we would have heard.’

Khomich clasped his hands behind his back and walked slowly to the window. ‘I trust you, Steane.’ The harsh voice was ominously controlled, giving no hint of his intentions. He turned and came slowly back to the desk, his great head nodding almost imperceptibly. ‘In time you may assume command of this wretched society. I expect you to show initiative.’ He coughed drily, patted his chest, clasped his hands again and went back towards the window. ‘I don’t expect stupidity, Steane. All field scouts are transferred detention guards. The renegade Gudenian will simply disembowel your so-called infiltrator—’

‘It’s not a guard,’ Khomich’s thick neck twisted with difficulty to glare at him. ‘It’s a woman – assistant secretary Shadd.’

‘A woman?’ In his surprise, Khomich’s voice emerged as a high-pitched squeak. He cleared his throat with guttural coughing and spat on the floor. ‘You sent a *woman*?’

‘We know they have an imbalance of sexes – a woman would be a prize...’ He waited for the explosion.

Khomich turned and came towards him, head down, walking on his heels with a deliberation that gave him an incongruous jauntiness.

Steane made up his mind in the long silence between them. He could hear the iron gongs from the distant fields. Nothing had changed — suspicion, fear, violence, all stemming from this peasant brute who walked on maps and on people. He had never wanted power for himself but he had seen enough now; Khomich had turned into a posturing old man, a parody of himself, vain and paranoid, hiding mental deterioration behind his own myth, relying on fear of his reputation to inspire gross flattery, which he could then use as evidence of his

people's faith.

At that moment, Steane expected to be physically assaulted. He had seen other people being kicked – senior administrators and guards; when his temper burst, Khomich would lash out at people, furniture, machinery or even the walls of the building itself.

Before he would allow himself to be degraded he made up his mind to kill Khomich in that long, bare room with the curtains that were rarely opened and the rough wooden desk that carried no papers and the torn map on the floor.

But Khomich did not attack him with boots or fists or skull.

Khomich laughed!

The small, blue eyes almost disappeared in creases of pink skin.

‘A woman!’ he roared. ‘Brilliant! You sent them a woman, a stupid administrator. They’ll be too busy raping her to slit her throat! Brilliant!’

Even as he felt himself slumping inwardly in relief, Steane was thinking of Kirsten Shadd being mauled by foul-smelling men who had turned themselves into savages.

‘She is not particularly attractive in appearance.’

Khomich roared heartily. ‘Those degenerates won’t be admiring her pretty eyes!’

‘She has experience of handling men.’

‘They are not *men*, they are hyenas — beasts!’ He slapped his hands together, tears of laughter blurring his eyes. ‘Like the wooden horse! A woman wooden horse!’ He punched Steane playfully on the bicep. ‘How many men can she handle, eh?’

Steane frowned. ‘I don’t understand – a wooden horse?’

‘It was before your time.’ Khomich rubbed his eyes and the laughter subsided. ‘What arrangements are you making to retrieve the helicopter?’

‘I’m putting the same officer in charge of the detachment. I’ll get onto it straightaway.’

‘Give your instructions to my security captain. You must learn to delegate, Steane.’ Khomich nodded at the door. ‘Tell Yuill to come in but don’t go away, it’s time you saw democracy in action.’ He casually pulled the map off his desk, letting it slide to the floor.

Steane flushed but there was no insult intended. This was Khomich in a good mood!

He bent to pick up the map and went through the gloomy ante-chamber.

He was giving the security captain lists of names and equipment when

he saw Yuill re-emerge from Khomich's office and signal for the nervous delegation to file through into the ante-chamber.

'Make the machine-section your first call, Crispin,' Steane was saying to the security captain. 'Tell Chandler to cannibalise one of the unserviceable machines for an engine replacement.'

'The commandant asked if you would step through,' Yuill interrupted. Steane smiled, noting the absence of 'sir'. Yuill was definitely head of his list for removal.

'Going to be a major expedition, sir,' Crispin said. 'I was thinking you might want a senior officer to command it.'

'We'll make Norman a temporary section leader. He'll either come back dead or promoted.'

As he went through the ante-chamber he grimaced, as if suffering from a headache. You're learning to smile while you're planning to put people on a hate list, he thought, you're becoming *devious*. Even before he opened the door he could hear Khomich's guttural voice. He took a deep breath.

Just for a second he thought of Kirsten Shadd out there somewhere in the Wilds, a tall, gawky girl who was probably braver than any of them.

But then, she'd never had to face Khomich in one of his rages...

Chapter 11

The glare of sun on yellow sand.

The squeak of boots sinking into yellow sand.

The glare came off the sand but when she raised her head the glare from the sky was even more intense.

She screwed up her eyes until her face muscles ached.

Some of the time they were on hard crust but when they came off a ridge their boots sank into loose, fine sand in the shallow trenches.

She concentrated on her own shadow. It was tireless, always ahead of her, leading her, it seemed, threatening to race on and leave her.

When the crust broke she staggered sideways, lurching into one of the two men. Strong hands held her for a moment. She could have collapsed into strong arms, begged to be taken care of. The hands turned her and guided her first steps and she was following her shadow again.

They came floundering up onto a ridge and the breeze blew hard grains against her left cheek.

Her eyes ran with tears. She tried to lick at the moisture running onto her cheek. The breeze covered her dry tongue with grit and she tried to lick enough saliva from the lining of her mouth to spit out the fine grains.

She wanted to see how far they'd come but the sky was a purple dazzle that threatened to blind her. She screwed her eyelids shut – dazzling colors seared across her eyeballs. Through a shifting kaleidoscope came a new image, stark and simple: a jutting beam, a dangling rope, a woman in silhouette standing under the rope.

A voice was warning her. *They will hang you*, it was saying over and over again, a worried voice.

Through slits blurred by tears and whipping sand she tried to see Sissons's face. Her foot dragged forward across sand and found mid-air. The jolt made her bite her tongue. She tasted salty blood and her parched throat ached to swallow.

Then the wind stopped and she blinked her eyes clear and tried to make sense of a half-moon of bleached wood standing up out of the sand.

In the center of the disc was a rusty metal stud. She massaged her

eyes. Dirkovitch and Sissons were already dragging off their packs and slumping against the bleached wood of the disc. She saw now that it was attached to a higher wall of scarred wood. She saw patches of peeling blue paint.

Dropping beside them she groaned with relief at being out of the wind. Dirkovitch took her flask and opened it for her.

‘Go easy on it,’ Sissons said quickly, ‘we’re a long way from water.’

The first sip only made her throat desperate for more. She carefully screwed the cap back on the flask. ‘What is this?’ she asked, raising her hand to touch the smooth wood. ‘Is it a wheel of some kind?’

She wondered why they both pretended not to have heard her question. Dirkovitch bared his teeth, biting into a dry protein cake. Sissons ripped a dark sliver of dried meat into pink shreds.

‘I said, what is this thing?’

‘I dunno,’ Dirkovitch mumbled, pointing to their left. ‘That’s concrete over there, jeez I’ll be glad to get off this goddamn sand.’ She could see the tall dark shapes now, still blurred in the dazzle of the sky and sand but unmistakably the work of man, straight lines, curves... geometrical...

Khomich scratched his thick neck. Steane was poised to get to the door ahead of the delegation. Khomich had answered all their questions with monosyllabic terseness, leaving Steane totally unprepared for what followed. With Khomich, rudeness was an art form, he was telling himself as the massive cropped head nodded to dismiss the machine-section leaders.

They began to shuffle to the door, blocking Steane’s chance of a rapid exit.

Khomich coughed and heads turned.

He turned away from them on his chair and then stood up, looking at the window.

‘I was a soldier,’ he said, as if speaking to himself. The section leaders exchanged nervous glances. ‘I was trained to carry out orders without question...’ He cleared his throat and turned to stare at the apprehensive faces. ‘I forget sometimes that I am no longer a soldier.’

His face gave no clue as to what he expected. One of the older men dared to take a step nearer the desk, looking at Khomich somewhere below the chin. ‘I speak for all of us, Commandant, we are most grateful for—’

‘You deserve to be reminded of the truth,’ Khomich went on, totally oblivious to the man’s interruption. ‘Delusions are dangerous. We were all tricked by scientists. Each of us has found illusions to live by – perhaps illusions are necessary for men, they make life more comfortable.’ He started to pace up and down, looking at the floor, hands meeting behind his back. ‘But the truth comes before all else. What is the truth? We are victims of scientific lunacy. That is all you have to remember.’

Again, the abrupt silence. Not knowing if they had been dismissed, some of the delegation made for the door, others shuffled nervously where they stood.

Steane reminded himself that only a few minutes before Khomich had said that one day he would be in charge of the Colony.

‘Would the commandant care to explain?’ he said sharply.

Khomich shrugged. ‘What is to explain? We all went through the same process.’ He frowned, suddenly staring at different faces in turn. ‘I’m correct, yes?’ He began to pace in front of them, like an officer inspecting troops. The desk got in his way. He raised his right leg and put his boot against it and gave it a shove, hands still clasped behind his back. The desk legs grated on the bare plank floor. Steane wished he had not spoken.

To his own amazement, he heard himself speaking again! ‘I don’t know about everybody else, sir, but I would like you to—’

‘Very well, very well,’ Khomich said patiently. ‘There was famine from a grain blight. Global famine, mass starvation. Many, many deaths. People looked to space — the stars!’ He shook with silent, mirthless laughter. ‘Scientists! Save the human race! I was a soldier, I carried out my orders. I did not ask myself if I was saving the human race, did I? Should I have asked myself that question? I don’t know.’ When he looked for an answer in the faces he saw only fear and ignorance. ‘Why do you all want to forget? I will tell you – because you are human beings who prefer illusions to truth! You—’ He jabbed a blunt forefinger into a man’s chest – ‘and you—’ Another section leader felt the powerful jab – ‘and you — all of us! Human beings, hiding from the truth!’ He frowned, seeing no comprehension. Blood rose in the broad, pink cheeks. ‘I am not an educated man, I am a soldier, I should not have to explain these matters to men of your brainpower. My job was to keep you alive – I am no damned scientist! And where are the scientists now, the geniuses who made us what we are? Where are the politicians who sent us into this wilderness? They no longer even speak to us by radio!

Survival — that is all we can think of. I have talked to you about production targets, food supplies, practical matters. Well, survival concerns your minds as well as your bellies! Before we had the threat of anarchy by social gangsters — now we are faced with anarchy of the mind. The doctors say it has to do with what these scientists did to us. I —’ He frowned in exasperation, seeing no face that understood.

‘You know what they did to us, don’t you? They cloned us, transferred us to these bodies — to survive on a starving planet they said! Damned scientists playing games with our lives!’ He paced more urgently, searching the faces for a sign of intelligence. ‘We are biological freaks! We live on the edge of nowhere, we have been forgotten, abandoned, left to fight with the bugs for survival! Have you stopped admitting this to yourselves? Are you trying to forget, pretend it is otherwise?’ Again he started jabbing the blunt finger into men’s chests, yet the aggression was like that of a concerned parent. ‘You cannot afford delusions – you and you — and you! Let the people hide behind their illusions but not their leaders. We are thirty-five times reduced in size, we have no natural place in this disgusting world of insects and stinking animals. But we can still think, we can still tell what is illusion and what is reality. We still have our human *willpower*.’

The blunt finger turned on his own barrel chest, hammering against his tight green tunic. ‘I have been guilty of errors. I ruled like a soldier, expecting total obedience. I saw my error and I admitted it and I have tried to be a different kind of leader. Why? Because I am not an insect, I am not a biological specimen in a laboratory. I have a name, I can remember what I was and I know what I am. What we all are — human beings! If I have the power to influence you let me make one promise: I will fight and go on fighting so that we can *survive*.’

Steane bowed his head, afraid to show what was on his face. In the shattering impact of Khomich’s speech a new tension spread through the crowded room.

Hands began to clap!

Steane looked up cautiously. They were all clapping! And Khomich, the Russian, was clapping his hands, too, and Steane found it impossible not to bring his hands together, his face flushed, his handclaps jarring his shoulders...

When they were alone, he searched for words. Khomich nodded briskly.

‘Sometimes these excesses are required.’

‘Khomich, it was magnificent!’

‘Don’t be stupid — I told them nothing. *Words.*’

‘You should use words more often, I felt inspired. I have disagreed with you in the past, I have even—’

‘Don’t say what you may later regret,’ Khomich growled. ‘I have sources of information, I am well aware you have made decisions without consulting me.’

‘It won’t happen again. I should have consulted you about my scheme to infiltrate Gudenian’s group, it’s my fault we’re having to delay Wildfire.’

‘No delay,’ Khomich said over his shoulder, striding towards the door. ‘I gave the order for Wildfire an hour ago.’

Steane stared, aghast. ‘But they’re still out there.’

‘Your woman will have even more credibility if they think we’re willing to let her burn.’ He nodded for Steane to follow him out of the room. In the ante-chamber he said, ‘I had Yuill check her file — you made a good choice. I had no knowledge of a former female security agent in the Colony. Let us hope she escapes the flames. Are you coming with me to the surveillance post? We should be there to see when the fire clears the disgusting Wilds.’

Steane followed helplessly, numb with the realization that there might just as well have been a string attached to his back...

‘No reason why snakes couldn’t get into the park,’ Sissons said through a mouthful of dried meat. ‘The high wall’s breached in two or three places.’

‘But it’s supposed to be checked regularly,’ Kirsten Shadd protested. Both men went on eating. Dirkovitch sucked his teeth.

‘Shooting snakes would be something, eh, Siss?’

‘You want to turn out like Bagley?’ Sissons sneered. ‘Anyway, snakes move pretty fast.’

‘I move pretty fast.’

‘We can handle anything,’ Sissons said ironically, ‘we’re red and blacks and don’t forget.’ He went on, without any change of tone. ‘I don’t intend to let them turn me into a Glasshouse zombie, Dirk.’

‘Yeah? You’d rather work in, the fields, huh?’

‘Sure, I’d rather work in the fields! You know what’s expected of Detention guards.’

Dirkovitch offered Kirsten Shadd a sliver of dried meat. ‘We don’t do badly out here. We get a lot more fruit as well.’ She shook her head.

‘You have to eat — didn’t they tell you about heat loss?’

The wind whipped a spume of sand across the ridge in front of their hollow beside the half-buried disc of bleached wood. Sissons picked at his teeth.

‘She’s still feeling shock — first time you ever killed anybody, Kirsten?’ She stared at him. He grimaced sympathetically. ‘Don’t get too guilty about Bagley. I’ve seen that bastard do things to prisoners—’

‘He drowned a guy in a bucket of soup!’ Dirkovitch exclaimed. ‘I saw him.’

‘Why didn’t you stop him?’

‘You kidding? Bagley? He was the officer in charge.’

‘It would’ve been Dirk’s head in the bucket,’ Sissons explained. ‘We ready to move?’

‘What is this thing?’ she asked, letting her hands slide over warm, sand-honed wood. Again they ignored her. ‘I asked you a question.’

‘Some old junk,’ Dirkovitch said, pulling on his pack. ‘Who cares?’

They had climbed out of the hollow onto the ridge when she looked back and saw a tall tube of metal rising in a square arch from the other end of the wooden wall. She followed the lines of the wooden walls, seeing another half-buried circle of wood. It dawned on her. She grabbed at Sissons’s arm.

‘It’s a trolley!’ she gasped. ‘Look at it!’ He nodded brusquely, peering ahead. ‘Look at it!’ she shouted. ‘It’s a wooden trolley — those were its wheels!’ She gazed all round the huge expanse of glaring sand. ‘The Sandpit, of course! This was the children’s sandpit when they—’

‘Just shut up, will you?’ Dirkovitch snapped, crowding behind her, forcing her on along the ridge.

‘What’s wrong?’ she demanded.

Sissons stooped to pick up a smooth pebble and wiped it on his chest. ‘Suck on a stone, it makes you less thirsty.’

She couldn’t understand what she had said. They traveled the length of the ridge until it sloped down and they had to plough knee-deep across fine sand blown by the rising wind into a trench. It was easier to be heard there, below the wind. She could see the huge shapes ahead, slightly more distinct. She came to a stop and stood there defiantly. They had gone a few paces before they looked back for her.

‘You can have a rest later,’ Sissons called. ‘I want to get off this open stretch—’

‘I’m not moving another inch until you tell me!’

‘Tell you what?’

‘Why you refuse to answer my questions about this place!’

Dirkovitch came back towards her, pleading with his eyes. ‘This is a prime spot to be picked up by crows, Kirsten.’

‘I don’t care!’

He was close enough for her to see red spots between the dark hairs on his jaw. He was still an adolescent. ‘We know it’s an old park, what does it matter? Let’s keep moving, huh? Please...’

She shook her head.

‘Let her stay, Dirk,’ Sissons shouted, starting forward again, walking purposefully.

‘He isn’t bluffing,’ Dirkovitch snapped. ‘For chrissake, I thought you were educated! Don’t you know what’s happening to him — he’s losing his memory. He doesn’t want to even *think* about... about that old stuff!’

Sissons was already going down the other side of the next ridge. Dirkovitch gave her a last, reproachful look and walked away.

She closed her eyes, letting her mind go blank. There were no voices, no transmitted waves of emotion, only the eery whistling of wind on sand.

When she opened her eyes, she was alone.

Fantasies of telepathic powers — wasn’t that an early sign of schizophrenia? She reminded herself of who she was and why she was there and ran to catch them up, angry at herself for behaving like a neurotic...

They went on in silence. Sand came off the tops of ridges in slipstreams. Fine grains stung her cheeks.

Sand spumed and spiraled into the air when their boots scraped on hard crust.

Sissons cupped his hands to shield his eyes. ‘It could be getting darker over there to the west,’ he shouted at Dirkovitch.

Dirkovitch pointed ahead. Through the wind that made her eyes water she saw the towering shapes, close enough now to suggest wooden surfaces and metal constructions.

The muffled vibrations of large shapes passing overhead tantalized them into squinting up at the dazzling sun and sky but always the birds, if they were birds and not tricks of the wind, had passed on, mysterious and frightening yet reassuring them that the whole world was not a dead wilderness.

And then they were coming off the blinding sand onto dry earth under gaunt, dead bushes and the glare had gone. Ahead of them, towering far into the blue sky, was a jagged escarpment of gray stone, embedded

with big round pebbles.

‘That’s concrete,’ Sissons shouted against the wind that followed them as they ran between the huge trunks of the bushes.

He let it all blurt out then as they wiped sand from their faces and necks and stood upright again. ‘I still don’t remember my first name,’ he snapped. ‘I don’t even remember much about *before*, just pictures, all blurs. It’s like being in a dream and not remembering how to wake up! Of course it was a wheel — you don’t think I recognized a *wheel*? Children used to play there. My family was starving — they gave big promises of what it was like in the army, I wish I’d starved to death!’

They passed into shadow. For a moment they indulged their weary cheek muscles, blinking and showing the whites of their eyes.

‘I was in the army,’ Dirk said. ‘It wasn’t too bad.’

‘It was good in the army,’ Sissons said vehemently. ‘Those bastards — tricking us into *this*?’

‘The Colony’s a bit easier since the—’

‘Since the big purge? All that Chalk Circle democratic crap?’ Sissons spat. ‘You can believe that when they knock down the Detention Compound.’

While they argued stupidly, she gazed up at the huge, jutting ledge of concrete. She began to feel an overpowering sense of awe: human hands had mixed the concrete, laid the huge slab: children had played with a trolley on a sandpit that was now a vast desert — but different humans, the race of giants who had once walked and laughed and kissed in this park.

She spoke quietly. ‘Sissons, I know what you mean now. You’re lucky if you’re losing your memory of before — we have to forget all of it.’

‘Yeah?’

She gestured upwards. Her mouth was a bitter gash in her raw, burned face. ‘We would have stepped down off that without even noticing it once. They tricked us. We’d be better off dead...’

Sissons snorted. ‘Is that what you think? They’ll accomodate you — we’ll all get hung for sure, if we ever get back to Glasshouse.’

‘We’ll say it was an accident,’ Dirkovitch protested.

‘She might get away with it — it’s the rope or the Diggings for you and me, kid.’

Dirkovitch turned away, his face to the breeze.

‘They don’t have to hang any of us,’ she said calmly, ‘not if we don’t go back.’

Sissons gave her a sarcastic look. ‘You want to stay in the Sandpit and

think about the good old days?

‘We can join Gudenian’s people.’

Dirkovitch looked round. ‘I think maybe I’d prefer hanging to watching my guts feed the ants!’

She shook her head. ‘You said they were short of women. You can use me to bargain with...’ The two men stared at each other. ‘And you’ve got all this equipment. You could—’

‘You don’t know what you’re saying,’ Sissons growled. ‘How do you think they’d treat you? Huh?’

‘I’m not going back to Glasshouse,’ she said firmly. ‘If you don’t want to come with me, I’ll go on my own. Just show me the direction and—’

‘Hey!’ Dirkovitch sniffed the air, turning to scan the horizon. He sniffed again. ‘That’s smoke!’

She sniffed. There was a trace of something in the air, acrid yet pleasant ... and familiar, very familiar ... she remembered a garden with apple trees and a cut on her knee...

‘Didn’t I tell you?’ Sissons looked happy. ‘Up on top – at least we’ll get a good view of their goddamn fire.’

She told herself it couldn’t be fire, Andrew Steane knew where she was. She hurried with them under the jutting ledge, careful not to veer too far into the shadows and the pitchblack recess deep under the concrete, a place where she could imagine scaly, slimy creatures seething malignantly as they waited for prey.

They climbed a loose spew of earth and grit up a steep break in the concrete. Dust kicked back from Sissons’s boots into her face. She couldn’t smell anything – anyway, she knew it was only imagination.

Sissons reached down to pull her up onto a vast plateau of gray concrete.

Even knowing what the huge wood and metal structures were didn’t make them any less awesome. She recognized the once-familiar objects of childhood – a climbing frame of rusty pipings, a wooden roundabout with iron handrails rising from a massive circular platform...

She had a glimpse of colors and smaller objects but Dirkovitch was shouting and when they turned to look out over the great expanse of sand the sky was darkening in the west.

She told herself it was rainclouds. Instinctively she shivered, thinking of thunder and lightning. Sissons and Dirkovitch pointed excitedly at a thin fragment of black leaf being swirled far above their heads.

‘Fire!’ Dirk chanted. ‘No more Jungle, it’s all going up in smoke!’

She sniffed. It couldn’t be!

Sissons pointed again and she saw a flicker of red between the blur of the distant Jungle and the growing blackness rising from the horizon.

Wildfire! Andrew Steane had allowed them to start Wildfire! Yet as far as he knew, she was still in the middle of the Jungle!

Sissons nodded towards the massive structures looming against blue sky to the north and east. 'Dump the gear and we'll enjoy the big blaze. We'll be spectators at our own funeral pyre.'

Dirk held his field hat against his chest and bowed his head. 'I will be mourned by a wide circle of broken hearted women.'

She shouted at them then. 'They were going to let us all burn to death! They tricked us! Don't laugh! They started Wildfire when they knew we—'

'I told you they would,' Sissons said with grim satisfaction. Then he frowned. 'Hey, not our funeral — Bagley's funeral! Yeah, we're okay!' He punched Dirk on the shoulder. 'There won't be nothing left of him — you've just been saved from the rope, kid!'

She half decided to tell them. She had come to like them both. They deserved to know the truth. Something made her hesitate.

'They'll know we broke orders, Siss.'

'How?' He grinned. 'We were making for the rendezvous and the fire started and we just ran. Bagley didn't run fast enough, that's all. After a fire like that who's going to find a body-with a bullet hole through the chest?'

'We've got his rifle and his equipment.'

'We'll bury it!'

Seeing more black fragments spinning overhead, he started towards the huge platform of the roundabout. 'Saved by the fire!' he yelled.

She followed slowly across a low bank of grit and sand that marked a slope where rainwater drained across the concrete. How could Steane have allowed them to launch Wildfire? Steane had no reason to have her killed, did he?

She frowned. The new thought was even more frightening.

Steane had denied it but she'd guessed this scheme had been part of some bigger plan ... infiltrating Gudenian's people without telling Khomich?

But suppose Khomich had found out...

There were too many twists, too many imponderables but one thing was certain — she *couldn't* go back. Not until she knew...

Just for a moment she felt sorry for Dirkovitch and Sissons but at least they were still alive.

‘I thought you didn’t want to go back to being a Glasshouse zombie,’ she called to Sissons, but he only waved and strode on towards the massive structure of dark wood and metal.

Would she have to tell him? What about Dirk — he wasn’t disillusioned about the Colony, and he’d said several times he was in favor of getting together every available guard and volunteer to make a full scale attack on Gudenian’s people, round them up or shoot the lot of them, he didn’t care which.

What if she told them the truth?

No, they’d never stand up to the kind of interrogation Gudenian would subject them to. Gudenian was a veteran Security guard, he—

The image of coiled death flashed subliminally across her vision.

She saw Sissons’ red and black figure suddenly galvanized. There was a yell. Images burned into her brain. Not images, *reality*.

A flat, broad head. Glistening red eyes. The reality of a nightmare. A snake! A darting, slithering rush of scales coiling and uncoiling. A nightmare where time itself was stricken into awed submission.

Horny scales, pale below, dark brown above, moving in lightning muscular spasms, curving and uncurving but always in a straight and deadly line, making ground on the frantic figure in red and black.

The scaly head rose from the gray concrete. Big venom-fangs reared from the moist cavern of the pale-fleshed mouth.

Another red and black figure streaked across her vision.

Yells. Screams. A rifle shot.

The fangs stabbed down and the pale mouth closed and scaly lips clamped across the struggling figure in red and black.

There was a pain that transcended pain.

She saw a man’s arms in sleeves of red and black, and a man’s gloved hands, waving, clawing, punching.

The trap-mouth tightened.

The unblinking eyes stared in fixed indifference.

A bullet pinged off dry, hard plates.

A scream became a bubble of bright human blood.

A small figure in red and black came close to the gleaming eye, raising a rifle.

There was a violent threshing of the scaly body. The small figure was hurled backwards.

Gloved hands trailed on gray concrete.

And one last image, as the scales rushed past her ... his face, his staring eyes, his open mouth...

Chapter 12

Even at the last minute, he could have saved her...

Steane did not need the telescope to see the blurred contours of the brown and yellow Jungle. The narrow, crowded surveillance platform was high in the vast cavern of shining glass, giving a view of the central section of the park almost as far north as the lake.

For an hour they had waited. Still there was no sign of flame.

Steane knew the trouble: now that the order for Wildfire had been given, the ruthless Losey had baulked at the reality of starting a blaze that might swing back and trap him. He would be retreating beyond an asphalt path that ran due north and south down the west side of the park.

Losey was using low ground as his alibi for loss of radio contact — Steane knew he would hear any transmission from this high up in Glasshouse.

All he had to do was demand a day's postponement. Not much to save her life...

But it meant challenging Khomich directly — here, in front of administrators and technicians. Whatever Khomich might tolerate in private, there could be no going back from a confrontation in public.

Steane saw Khomich at the telescope tripod. The others on the platform exchanged nervous glances behind his back. They don't consider me important enough to worry about, he thought.

He turned away from the wall of glass and looked out into the vast spaces of Glasshouse. The surveillance platform was the pinnacle of scaffolding that rose from the roof of the wooden building known as Control. He remembered the night he had brought her in secret to his office. She had guessed the truth behind his plan — even before he had admitted it to himself; from the start it had no other interpretation than an attempt to prove that he was more capable of running the Colony than Khomich...

Khomich had recognized it for what it was!

Steane squirmed. For a moment, in his fear and guilt, he forced

himself to lean over the handrail. Far below he saw the dark floor of concrete and the low brick walls that enclosed rectangular beds of earth. From here it was easy to see that Glasshouse had once served another purpose: pipes that had heated the park's collection of tropical plants still ran along the main walls; a few small, hardy plants still struggled to stay alive in the untended beds of earth.

It would be easy to step out into that vast space and find both punishment and penance... and a release from his own cowardice...

He straightened up, feeling utterly disgusted with himself. Suicide?

I am *not* a coward, he said angrily to himself. Whatever else I may be, I am not a coward.

He turned towards the thick glass that curved above the heads of the people on the platform, part of the north wall of Glasshouse. He came to stand beside Khomich at the telescope. The platform was so high he felt as if he were looking down on a three-dimensional map of the central section of the park.

'I was in a real fire once,' Khomich growled.

'Ah yes, Arcadia One.' Freeling, the duty controller, had just the right note of deference and encouragement in his voice. 'Of course I've read the *official* version, Commandant... I don't suppose it's the whole truth...?'

Steane wanted to be sick.

'Official histories do not tell lies, but they never tell the *whole* truth.'

People crowded nearer, eager to share this rare moment of reminiscence. Steane wished that a great hand would topple the platform and send them all hurtling to the concrete floor far, far below.

'That fire also was in a walled garden,' Khomich went on cheerfully, 'but much smaller than this park...'

Steane had heard it all before and wondered bitterly if this time Khomich's bout of nostalgia would make him careless enough to mention the name that was no longer spoken aloud in the Colony: the name Bruce.

Like so many people in the past, he found himself not only defeated but baffled – Khomich kicked desks, for long periods guttural grunts seemed to represent his command of the language. Even looking at him now, in a good mood, naively boasting of a long-forgotten incident to an obsequious audience that he despised, you saw only a perfect stereotype of a thick-necked bully. How could a man like that almost casually outmaneuver opponents and rivals who were, by every measurable standard, his intellectual superiors?

Steane had taken it for granted that he was cleverer than Khomich ... now, as he waited for the fire that would kill Kirsten Shadd, he was left shattered not only by defeat but by the revelation of his own delusions and inadequacy. His plan to infiltrate Gudenian's people had been treachery against Khomich, he saw that now very clearly, the triumph that would establish him as a leader in his own right...

Listening to the harsh voice describing long-ago treacheries and betrayals and heroics and watching the nauseatingly attentive faces of the people on the platform, Steane began to comprehend the man's power. It lay in the overblown egos of other men; it lay in the contrast between the outward appearance and the mind that lay behind the piggy blue eyes; a brainless thug who talked like a semi-literate, often incoherent with childish rages and tantrums – a dangerous man if he had you strapped to an interrogation chair but no imagination, no vision ... nobody ever took Khomich seriously as a rival until it was too late!

Then you realized there was another man inside, a subtle master of human psychology, the eternal peasant who survived by camouflage. Life and death — Khomich's only criterion! Man had no friends, no morals, no pity. Man bowed to superior power and struck at weakness. Life and death — the only reality!

Steane felt almost breathless. Many things began to make sense. He looked at the people listening to Khomich and saw hypocrisy and sycophancy in their eager faces ... most of them despised Khomich but which one of them had the guts to shove him off the edge of the platform?

What had happened to all the others who had underestimated the man?

Where was Bruce?

Where was Lindsay, who had once looked even more brutal and ruthless than Khomich himself?

Where were all the self-important figures who thought that collectively they could humiliate Khomich?

Some were dead. Some were down there laboring in the fields. Some were far below, sweating in the gloomy hell of the Diggings. And the famous Bruce? He was lost out there in the Wilds with a bunch of renegades and criminals.

Was it less than a year ago...? In the Table Room... He remembered the dim light of the lamps and the faces of the Colony's leaders sitting round the big table, preparing to seize power. Faced with anarchy and rebellion, they had seen a way to repay Khomich for the fear under

which he had made them live, at the same time satisfying their own ambitions.

They had chosen Khomich's deputy, the sadist Lindsay! No doubt they were already planning how to control Lindsay after he had served his purpose. They feared Khomich for making them live like cowards, and hated Bruce for making them feel like morons.

The plan had been, as the technocrats and scientists liked to say, *elegant* in its simplicity: to play off Khomich against Bruce and then depose the survivor. Bruce, the eternal maverick who had always had the moral sense to be suspicious of authority, had obscured the issue by escaping into the Wilds; that seemed to simplify matters but Khomich had been six moves ahead before they knew the game had started.

Khomich, the Butcher, the implacable enemy of mob democracy, had turned to the weary people he was supposed to be crushing, the leaders of the populist agitation known as the Chalk Circle — the very same leaders who were now fawning before him on the surveillance platform! One moment he had been stamping down on any minor demand for reform, the next he was reminding the people of their – natural rights!

Steane thought of the part he had played as a low-ranking Security officer — a minor part it had seemed then. He had gone behind Lindsay's back and informed Khomich that Lindsay was threatening the Colony's safety by his refusal to act on Gudenian's warning that a fox had got into the park.

'Now he saw the pattern. Behind all the rationalizations and hypocrisy, the basic reality was there before him on the high platform looking out over the great park: Khomich was still in power — with no rivals. The workers' leaders smiled subserviently, ready to lick his boots. The workers worked harder – reforms had made life less harsh but the system had not changed...

And he, Steane, had risen in a few months from obscurity to second place in the hierarchy!

Self-loathing made him want to choke...

'There it is!'

Even without the telescope he could see the first billow of smoke. When Khomich motioned excitedly for him to take his place at the tripod, he put his right eye to the aperture but saw only a blur.

Moving the focus adjuster, he saw red flame.

He shifted his feet, letting the heavy telescope swing across bushes

whose dead leaves hung like useless decorations until he was looking at a mass of drought-yellow creeper.

He stood back, face impassive.

‘Look — it’s spreading!’ Khomich slapped his hands together. ‘What is the wind, Freeling?’

The duty surveillance officer went to the platform edge and looked up through the sheer wall of glass. Just above the platform, the outside wall of Glasshouse curved inwards in its massive frame of metal girders. ‘The arrow is pointing east, Commandant.’ Freeling pointed out across the park. ‘Watch the smoke, as long as it’s blowing towards those bushes the wind is directly from the west. You see the juniper bushes?’

Khomich snorted at the suggestion that he would know or care what bushes were called.

‘I hope the fire’s a good idea,’ Steane said, loudly enough for everybody on the platform to hear, ‘it would take only a five-degree shift in the wind to bring it this way.’ People were instantly alerted. Nobody actually moved, yet Steane felt them edging away, leaving a neutral zone around him. ‘We’d lose the Net, of course, and the wheat crop — not to mention the helicopter.’

Khomich put his hand on the young deputy commandant’s shoulder. People relaxed. Losey’s voice came through static on six or seven transceivers, echoing far out into the great spaces of Glasshouse, reporting that his detachment was moving east to grid square seven north, twelve east. Freeling checked this on the papier-maché relief-map of the park.

Khomich’s cropped hair was level with Steane’s nose. The thick neck creased in pink folds as the small blue eyes squinted up.

‘Tell me how to right a war without violence, Andrew.’

‘Who are we at war with? Gudenian’s people?’

‘Yes, those criminals. What will they eat now? They’ll come starving and beg on their knees.’

‘If they don’t die in the fire—’

‘They have time to escape – they have the lake. This has saved us all the effort of rounding them up in that stinking place of bugs and animals.’ He lowered his voice. ‘I hope the woman Shadd escapes, of course, a good idea of yours, yes, excellent.’

‘It was a good idea because it did not involve violence and destruction.’

Khomich stared at him. Steane felt cold all over. His eyes began to blink of their own accord. This close he could see little lines on

Khomich's neck and round his eyes.

The other people on the platform went on discussing the fire and the wind, showing an exaggerated indifference.

Then Khomich patted his arm. The great cropped head nodded in approval.

'You are not a yes-man and that is your strength, Andrew. We make a good combination. Unusual, however, for the old man to be the reckless one and the young man to advocate caution... don't you think?'

Khomich went back to the telescope.

Steane realized it was the first time he had ever heard Khomich referring to himself as an old man.

The telescope focus – it had been blurred when he took Khomich's place at the tripod!

An old man...!

As he watched black smoke billowing up from a forest that was turning to flame, Steane felt that he had gone through an invisible barrier and left all fear behind...

The band of hunters wearing smooth animal pelts saw smoke on the distant horizon as they hauled a net of twisted grass over a clump of water lily roots and stalks now partially exposed to the sun by the retreating water of the lake.

'Hey – a fire!' shouted a hunter wearing an orange and black pelt.

'Get the net over!' growled a tall man with a rough blond beard. They clambered quickly over stinking vegetation and spaced themselves evenly round the net, each ready with a heavy wooden club or long spear.

There was a jerking movement.

Gudenian leaped onto the net. It sagged treacherously under his torn boots and he felt water and mud squelching against his legs.

Splaying his legs for balance, he moved sideways, the club raised in both hands. 'See it now,' he said quietly, his eyes fixed on a glistening skin covered with brown lumps. He moved in a slow semi-circle until he saw the brilliant orb of a speckled eye.

His club hammered down time and time again on the head of the wildly threshing frog. When it was motionless, he scanned the net but there was no other movement.

'One lousy half-grown frog,' he cursed as he stepped off the net.

The others had already turned to stare at the distant smoke.

‘Just like those clumsy bastards to start a fire by accident during a drought,’ snarled a red-haired man wearing a dirty white pelt.

Gudenian was shielding his eyes to stare across fetid, bubbling mud over which hovered swarms of biting midges and mosquitoes and a huge blue dragonfly patrolling its hunting territory.

When he looked round they had their backs to him. He hurled his club at random, hitting the red-haired man. ‘You never see smoke before, you?’

‘The red-haired man glared venomously, rubbing his buttocks under his smooth-haired pelt.

‘That’s a very big fire, Gudenian,’ exclaimed a heavily suntanned man in a black and orange pelt. He squelched across shallow water to reach hard, fissured mud before he found something. He threw the soft gray feather up in the air. It blew away from him. ‘The wind will bring it this way.’

‘Okay, Abram, you starve to death watching their amazing fire, fine by me. Do you mind if the rest of us look after the food situation?’

They dragged the net clear and dragged the frog out from the squashed mess of lily shoots, quickly tying its long hindlegs together and then its squat, fingered forelegs, careful not to touch the poisonous glands on a shiny skin already drying stickily in the sun.

‘There’s got to be ducks at the bridge,’ Gudenian said. ‘We’ll get the long rope.’

‘What about that goddamn fire, Gudenian?’ Abram Chernitz asked patiently. ‘Could be we’ll have to pack up and—’

‘It won’t get round the lake, Abram,’ Gudenian grinned. He winked at the others. ‘Tell you what – if we catch a big duck we’ll let their *amazing* fire roast it for us!’ He bowed towards the distant smoke. ‘Thank you, Glasshouse.’

The hunting party cheerfully slung the dead frog from a spear and carried it on their shoulders across hard mud towards the shadow of the huge bank. They began to chant loudly in time to their jogging footsteps. In that world, noise meant strength — a display of aggression. Nature’s first line of defense. Old man Bruce had taught them that.

Apparently by accident, Gudenian brushed against Abram’s bare arm. Without exchanging a look, they both hung back until they were at the rear of the line and turned to look at the smoke darkening the sky in the west.

‘I’m surprised Khomich took this long to think of it,’ Abram muttered.

‘It’s a declaration of war, Abram. He’s been stewing in his own acid

thinking of us living out here — free!’ Gudenian raised his arms towards the smoke. ‘I hate you, too, Khomich!’ he shouted.

They stood together under the massive timbers of the roundabout. Dirk was in tears.

‘I panicked,’ he sobbed. ‘Siss was screaming at me to shoot it in the eye and I panicked.’

‘No, you were very brave,’ Kirsten said, putting her hand on his cheek.

‘I couldn’t shoot it in the head in case I hit Siss and he kept screaming at me!’

‘The poison was already paralyzing him, it was too late by then, Dirk, don’t blame yourself...’

They clung to each other.

Through tears, she saw the sky darkening. ‘Look, that’s smoke!’

Even as he wiped his eyes, the first of the animals came hopping onto the great expanse of concrete...

Chapter 13

The black rabbit halted and sat up on its hindlegs, front paws dangling at its chest. The tall ears were erect, turning this way and that.

A wisp of smoke came billowing across the sandpit. The rabbit tensed, drummed with its powerful hindfeet on concrete and came running towards them.

Dirk jumped in front of her, waving his arms and yelling. The rabbit changed direction and sprinted past them.

‘The park’s full of them,’ Dirk said quietly. ‘Siss always wanted to shoot one — he shot covies but he never got to shoot a rabbit.’ He covered his face and stood with his head bowed. ‘A goddamn, lousy *snake*?’

‘He’s gone now, Dirk. Look at that smoke!’

‘I hope they burn the whole, lousy, stinking park to the ground!’

Kirsten saw a charred fragment soaring overhead and soon there were more fragments, some spiraling in air currents, some floating to the concrete and being swept along in small eddies.

She pulled his hands away from his face. ‘He’s dead, Dirk, *dead*. We’re still alive. Get his rifle and—’

‘I wouldn’t touch it!’

‘All right.’ She ran out into brilliant sunlight. She could smell the smoke now and hear a distant roar. As she stopped to pick up Sissons’s rifle, her eye caught a movement.

Across the sand the animals came seething in frenzied panic, scurrying covies like miniature pigs with pelts of orange and white and black; rabbits, some sprinting with scuts erect, some leaping in four-legged bounds, black rabbits, brown rabbits; she saw darting mice. She heard shrill squeaks and drumming paws and behind the stampeding animals, the billowing smoke and the crackling roar of the approaching fire.

In her panic she dropped the rifle and ran back to the shelter of the massive turntable.

Dirk fired in the air but the noise of his rifle was lost in the crackling of the advancing flames and the shrill squeals of the panicking mammals. Huge, furry bodies hurtled towards them and she saw wild

eyes and yellow teeth. Dirk was shouting at her to run and then he was grabbing her by the thighs and hoisting her up the metal rim onto the massive wooden platform.

She felt heat on her face as Dirk swung himself up beside her and they cowered beside a big pillar of rusting metal. The insects came then, through the gusts of smoke, flies that exploded against their bodies in a tangle of transparent wings and thin legs, white moths fluttering blindly, a myriad of lacewings and midges and mosquitoes; the concrete below seethed with spiders, big ones with yellow bodies and harvestmen on stilt legs; a blue butterfly fell softly from the poisonous sky, landing on its back, delicate legs helplessly treading the air; dead and dying insects began to rain down through the smoke, black furry bees, still laden with heavy leg baskets of yellow pollen, wasps, hoverflies and sawflies... They were both coughing then and she knew they had to get down, below the smoke, down into the earth. The red glare came as they were running across the huge turntable, suddenly, as if from an explosion.

They looked back at the wall of living fire.

Dirk's stubbled face was streaked with black cinders and running with sweat that glowed in the glare from the flames, giving him the red mask of a demon.

'It can't cross the Sandpit!' he yelled.

She huddled against him. Through her fingers she saw the nearest bushes black against the dancing flames: for a moment she wanted to believe him – to be taken care of as women were once supposed to be taken care of — but the black branches sprouted their own tongues of fire. The furnace heat began to scorch her hands and face. He kept squeezing her hand, until she ran, dragging him, remembering he was just a boy. When he tried to hold her back, she slipped his hand, knowing he would chase her as she ran head down, away from the scorching heat.

Her boots kicked and crunched through hard insect shells and soft butterfly wings and yellow-faced wasps. A foul stench of blood and acid came through the acrid smoke rasping on her throat and lungs.

He was close behind as she dropped down from the turntable onto concrete. The mammals had long gone. She let him land on the concrete and she was running again, towards massive iron stanchions where there seemed to be a gap in the smoke.

Dirk was still chasing her, yelling at her to stop. A searing blast of dry, hot air caught her in the face and the smoke swirled upwards, momentarily giving her a clear view of flames ahead — a wall of fire

racing round the concrete plateau.

She changed direction towards a blur of distant vegetation. The smoke billowed down again and she knew she was running for her life, desperately trying not to breathe, knowing that another lungful of smoke would suffocate her.

A wall of pink and blue bulges loomed out of the smoke, giving her no chance to veer away. She crashed against it, throwing out her arms to shield her face.

The wall felt strangely soft and she sensed a large object shuddering across the concrete with the force of her impact. Her hands clawed for a grip at scarred plastic but her momentum kept pushing the bulging wall away and she hit the concrete, jarring her wrists and knees.

Face almost touching the ground, she found herself in a current of cooler air that swept across the concrete in a narrow layer under the black smoke. She could breathe!

There was a convulsive, thunderous shock-wave and a huge wind came from all sides. The smoke funneled upwards and she saw the wall of flames racing to form a barrier that would enclose the whole playground.

She huddled in the shelter of the large pink and blue object, her cheek pressed on concrete that already seemed much hotter. She told herself to run before the gap closed, before she was trapped, but her brain had lost command of her legs. She started to raise her head to shout for Dirk, but losing him didn't seem important. She could breathe, that was all that mattered. Terror gave way to a sensation of well-being.

Her eyes followed the contours of the colored bulges. Dreamily, she realized she was looking at the grotesque parody of a human face.

Water splashed nearby and she felt drops on her face but that was the kind of thing that happened in a dream. The face grinned at her. She smiled in return. They grinned at each other, two faces, both resting their cheeks on concrete. There was another splash and she saw a wisp of white vapor.

The pink lips moved. It was going to speak to her!

A blue eye began to dissolve into a large blue tear...

Chapter 14

The grotesque faces from a childhood dream grinned and frowned against raging curtains of fire.

In the dream she became angry with them and shouted at them to run, while there was still a chance.

In the dream, waterbombs smashed on concrete. White wisps hovered over the wet explosions and were then sucked up into a huge column of hot air.

Water hit her face — cold water.

She blinked.

The blue eye slowly rolled down onto a red nose. When she looked at the next towering figure, its stockinged cap was melting, and she came out of the dream and ran between the melting plastic statues of gnomes and dwarfs, shouting Dirk's name, trying to find shelter from the white heat of the surrounding flames.

Massive timbers oozed oil that bubbled and blackened into blisters. Iron became too hot to touch. She began to cough, gasping to fill her lungs with hot, dry air.

The plastic figures were losing their shapes now, colors running into each other, faces sliding into squashed sandwichlines of red and blue and green. Plastic began to bubble. Her red and black OD jacket started to singe.

A big waterbomb fell tantalizingly near but when she raced to soak herself in the spew of drops she found only a wet patch that was already evaporating in curling, steamy wisps.

Another raindrop fell so close it splashed in her face. She tried to lick her lips and cheeks and chin but the ferocious heat from the flames dried her skin before she could feel the miracle of cold water.

The hissing sound rose steadily through the crackling roar of the flames and she found herself wading through white vapor that soon rose to her chest and then a raindrop smashed on her head, knocking her sideways to the ground...

They watched the inferno from the high surveillance platform inside

the north wall of Glasshouse, and laughed and joked until they realized that it was not only smoke that was darkening the sky.

‘Rain!’ somebody groaned. ‘Three months of unbroken drought and what do we get the moment we start Wildfire? *Rain!*’

‘We’ve managed to clear most of that central section,’ Freeling protested, sidling a glance at Khomich.

Steane stared at the towering column of smoke that rose towards the impenetrable blackness of the sky. He could see red fire, so distinct even at that range he imagined he could hear the furnace-roar of flames, the crackling of dry wood and, through the roar, the screams...

Khomich was beside him. Their eyes met. The small blue eyes seemed to convey sympathy. ‘The fun is over. We will talk in my office.’

The hunters could see the smoke from the eastern end of the lake, as they dragged a heavy rope of twisted grass round a small, slim trunk at one end of the ornamental bridge.

Abram pointed at the sky. ‘That isn’t all smoke, Gudenian, that’s a raincloud.’

Gudenian shivered in mock-dread. ‘Save me from the mighty rains.’ He sneered at Abram. ‘Get your bloody hands on that rope, you — we’re going to catch a big one if it takes us till the rain’s up to our necks!’

In an ecstasy of savage anticipation, he ran towards the men who were dragging the rope round the tall trunk and shoved them aside, big veins standing out on his neck as he hauled the rope over his shoulder to complete the loop...

The man saw the smoke again when he cautiously raised his head above the steep bank. Raindrops were already spattering on the dried mud of the exposed river bed. The smoke was rising from behind a brick wall on the other side of the river, reduced now to a slow-moving stream by the drought.

He watched for a sign of life, chewing methodically on a hunk of cheese and coarse brown bread. People had become very clever at camouflaging their houses but sooner or later they had to light a fire. He scanned the brick wall. There was an old metal sign on a post. He closed his eyes, listening for voices or barks. That kind of wall often meant dogs. He heard nothing and felt into his shoulder bag for an apple. Living rough like this, your teeth got furry but apples helped. Why the

hell couldn't that bloody farmer have just given him food?

Not that he baulked at killing people but ammunition wasn't so easy to come by out here...

Chapter 15

At first each waterbomb came as a separate miracle.

Kirsten opened her jacket and held her face to the dark sky, letting fine spray cool her skin. When another big raindrop smashed against her shoulder, sending her staggering, she started laughing.

She ran this way and that towards each new explosion of cold water. From all sides came a vast hissing. Irregular gaps appeared in the walls of flame. Water streamed down the misshapen plastic lumps that had once been nursery book gnomes and dwarfs. She remembered Dirk and called his name, wanting to hold him, seeing visions of their naked bodies through white spray.

Out of the pouring sky fell small flies and moths. They struggled briefly before big drops flattened them in shallow pools accumulating on the concrete. She came face to face with a black bumble bee dragging itself through shallow water like a crippled bear, its glassy chitinous wings now fractured and sodden, veined membranes that trailed uselessly as spray showered on its black hairs.

In her ecstasy she would have helped the bee, if she had known how, yet as she ran past she experienced a thrill that was faintly sadistic ... she was alive and that was all that mattered.

She kicked joyfully at streaked reflections of red and yellow flames on the rippled pools, holding out cupped hands to catch cold spray, letting the water run down her parched throat.

‘Dirk!’ she shouted, laughing to herself. ‘Dirk...!’

There was no steam now. Soon there were no flames reflected in the churning surface water. A first cold shiver brought her to her senses. Her hands felt to fasten her jacket just as a smooth curve of water flashed past her eyes and exploded at her feet. Water smashed up into her face. She staggered, blinded by harsh, stinging spray.

She ran for cover through a new onslaught of hurtling raindrops, her tiny black and red figure lurching through a ferocious white spray that covered the vast plane of gray concrete. She ran blindly, battered by raindrops that threatened to smash her to the ground, gasping for breath as cold water hit her eyes and flooded into her nostrils.

When her eyes blinked to show a brief glimpse of something dark and

massive looming out of the slanting curtains of rain, she ran headlong for shelter.

At first, in the dark space under huge timbers, she was happy simply to be out of the deafening spray and the battering waterbombs. She rubbed her eyes dry and realized she was back under the giant roundabout.

She shook water out of her ears. Her teeth were chattering. A terrible chill seized her whole body and she shivered in her sodden clothes. Her jaw shook uncontrollably. A cold wind moved in the dark space under the massive platform. She moved back from the wall of white spray, only to find herself under a beaded curtain of drips falling from a crack in the huge wooden planks overhead.

Something moved in the shadows.

She saw a pinpoint of light. It was an eye.

‘Dirk!’ she gasped with relief. ‘It’s me, Dirk, thank God you’re—’

The eye glinted at her from a face that was covered in smooth black hairs. Around her she suddenly sensed the presence of huddled creatures. A scream rose in her throat as her hands touched a hairy flank. The animal gave a slight jerk but did not run.

The scream died in her mouth as her hands began to feel warm...

‘People do not die so easily as you imagine,’ Khomich rasped, closing his curtains on a window streaked with wind-driven rainwater. ‘We need more light.’

Steane turned up the lamp wick. An aroma of vegetable oil filled the bare, shadowy room. Khomich came and sat behind his desk. Without thinking, Steane reached round for a chair. There was only one chair in Khomich’s room.

Steane refused to admit even the possibility of fear. He put his hands in his pockets and pretended to yawn.

‘Tell me the real reason you sent this woman to join Gudenian’s criminals.’

Steane moved back to lean against the wall. ‘Whatever else they may do, they won’t kill a woman.’

‘Why this particular woman?’

‘She was the one who got Wisnovsky to confess – don’t you remember? She was on Bogaert’s staff—’

‘Wisnovsky would have confessed to the first guard who tapped him on the nose.’

‘We didn’t want a confession from a multiple fracture victim — we wanted him to stand up in public and sound like a man with sorrow in his heart. Remember?’

Khomich shrugged dismissively. ‘Does this qualify her for a dangerous operation in the Wilds?’

‘She’s very resourceful—’

The phone rang on Khomich’s desk. He picked it up and listened without speaking. Finally he grunted and let the phone clatter to the desk without replacing it. He thought for a moment then stood up and walked towards the curtains, hands clasped behind his back.

‘I looked up her records — she was a fully-trained SG agent stationed in Paris. She was sent here with a cover identity — some kind of stupid psychologist – just like that woman Boden who betrayed us.’ He looked round and frowned. ‘Don’t leave the phone like that,’ he said irritably. ‘Yuill can hear what we are saying.’

Steane snorted incredulously but Khomich had already turned his back on him again. Just for a moment it seemed very simple: three quick steps across the room, press his pistol against the pink skin bulging on the back of the thick neck... instead, he went to the desk and replaced the phone, telling himself that Yuill would have heard the shot. Yuill was a creature of poisonous tentacles – only Khomich knew how much power he had. Yuill would have to be isolated and eliminated before any move could be made to depose Khomich.

He realized it was the first time he had consciously formed a specific intention to overthrow Khomich. He moved back to lean against the wall, unable to take his eyes off the bulging neck and cropped head. He felt a sensation of breathlessness.

Khomich spoke quietly, without looking round. ‘I did not expect you to start conspiring against me so soon, Andrew.’

‘Taking measures to protect the Colony isn’t betraying *you*, Khomich.’

‘A major plan to infiltrate Gudenian’s savages and you did not tell me? The choice of a woman with a background of conspiracy and treachery?’

Steane heard wind and rain on the window, like a chorus of ghostly voices chanting and hissing... and gloating...

‘I chose her because she was the best person for the job,’ he snapped. ‘I didn’t realize you were so far along the road to paranoia.’

Khomich turned slowly. His small blue eyes traveled up Steane’s uniform as if inspecting a guard of honor. They came to rest on Steane’s face. He nodded slowly, then walked to his desk.

For a moment Steane thought he was picking up the chair to attack him. His hand edged towards his holster.

Khomich's hand fastened round the end of a chair leg. His arm straightened until it and the chair were in a perfect horizontal line from his shoulder, demonstrating the sheer strength of his wrist.

'But for Wildfire you were not going to tell me about this scheme. If it failed, the woman Shadd would have been listed as a renegade deserter.' The arm and the chair kept their perfectly straight line. There was no sign of strain on his broad, pink face. 'If it succeeded, you would have taken all the credit for bringing back Gudenian with the woman Hoessner. People would have stopped dismissing you as my puppet. That was your intention, Andrew.'

Steane glared angrily, embarrassed at Khomich's crude display of animal strength. 'The hell with people! You'd better stop dismissing me as your puppet, Khomich. I'm not loyal to *you* — I'm loyal to this Colony.'

'And do you think you are better fitted than me to safeguard the Colony?'

'I don't do stupid tricks with chairs!'

Khomich looked along his arm as if he had forgotten what he was doing. He shrugged and lowered the chair. 'It is good exercise for the muscles. Are you coming with me to the monitor cabin?'

Khomich was already walking to the door. After the weird menace of his demonstration with the chair, his sudden relaxation of manner left Steane confused.

'Why do we want to go to the monitor cabin? We should be discussing something important. There's a weasel in the park!'

'One more stinking animal makes little difference,' Khomich said casually, opening the door. 'We can talk about it on the way. Don't you want to hear the madman Hallot's first broadcast as our new ruler?'

'*Hallot?* You are serious? How the hell could—'

Khomich had already gone.

Steane hurried to catch him. The door of the small antechamber swung back in his face as Khomich strode through into Yuill's outer office. Flustered and indignant, Steane realized too late how silly he looked as he saw the creepy Yuill smiling at him. He hurried after Khomich, only catching up with him as they passed the Security checkpoint.

'*Hallot's* in control of WFC? I don't believe it.'

Khomich strode on without looking to the left or to the right, forcing

Steane to quicken his step, making him feel even more foolish. Anybody but Khomich he would have grabbed him by the collar and hurled him against the wall.

‘We can hear what he says on the radio,’ Khomich said as they started down the stairs from Tier Four. ‘About the weasel. The guards are alerted now, they will shoot it if it comes near this building.’ Steane was forced to move to the side as they met people coming up the stairs. Khomich gave no sign of seeing the nervous looks and clumsy salutes of the people who were suddenly shocked to find him striding past them on the stairs.

Steane made an effort to hold onto his dignity, slowing down so that they would not see him scurrying after his master. Khomich did not wait for him and he had to take the Stairs two at a time.

‘I welcome the weasel — an outside threat keeps people too busy for idle discontent,’ Khomich went on when Steane was close behind him again. ‘You think I have neglected the question of Gudenian and his renegades — and the pregnant woman?’

Steane waited until they were alone on the next flight of stairs. ‘She’s had the baby eight months now and you haven’t done anything to get her back.’

Khomich went on striding down the stairs at the same remorseless pace. ‘Why do you think I wanted a fire? I do not know what these criminals are eating but a fire will destroy everything. Now there is rain — there may be floods, winter will come...’

The building became more crowded as they reached the lower levels. Khomich made no attempt to slow down. Steane realized bitterly that it was deliberate — the whole Colony was meant to see him trotting behind the puppet master. Yet if he tried to slow down, Khomich simply left him behind.

There was only one thing he could do.

On the next flight down, he raced to get ahead of Khomich and then turned to block his way. Khomich stopped. The small blue eyes rested on Steane’s face. They heard people coming up towards them.

‘I’m not letting you humiliate me, Khomich,’ he said loudly.

‘Am I walking too fast for you?’

As a group of Security guards moved into single file to come up past them, Khomich gestured politely for him to lead the way.

It was Steane who emerged first from the ground level of the wooden building onto the vast open floor of Glasshouse. He felt even more foolish with Khomich behind him, especially as they were immediately

in full view of a crowd of several hundred people watching a softball game being played against the brick wall of one of the old flower beds.

Play stopped as the teams saw Khomich.

People crowded together on both sides of the diamond and perched up on the wall to watch Khomich and Steane skirt the playing area, moving beyond the deep fieldsman. Steane felt his cheeks burning with embarrassment. He avoided the faces and stared up at the huge glass walls of the towering Glasshouse, hearing wind and rain from the gray afternoon outside.

Just for a moment, the massive scale of the building, the vast forces of Nature, combined to put things in proper perspective; ten thousand human beings whose lives had been unalterably manipulated by science, ten thousand people left like superfluous laboratory specimens to drag out a parody of human life in a deserted corner of a hostile world; how utterly stupid to face the unimaginable terror of this nightmare behind a shield of petty jealousies and ambitions! They should all be fighting together, looking for a way to make sense out of whatever future was left to them.

Yet behind him, as Khomich raised his hand to signify that the game should continue, he heard people jeering and cat-calling at each other over a stupid ballgame. To his right he saw the low ugly Compound building where criminals and deviates were at this moment being put through rigorous punishment routines known euphemistically as rehabilitation.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the crowds in the glow of light from the windows of the tall wooden building known as Control. The pitcher made his jerky, underarm delivery and the batter swung at mid-air. The crowd yelled.

Didn't they *hear* the wind outside?

'I was wrong about these things,' Khomich said philosophically as they headed towards another wall of red brick beyond the Compound. 'Games make people happy – they work *harder* afterwards despite the loss of energy. Do you understand that?'

'What do you want me to say?' Steane made no attempt to hold back his flow of bitter resentment. 'You've learned the secret of popularity, Khomich. You're the master of psychology. You know more about playing games than anybody else. I'd have to put a bullet through your head to get us on equal speaking terms!'

Khomich frowned sympathetically. For a moment he made as if to pat Steane on the shoulder but Steane pulled away stiffly. Khomich looked

back at the crowds round the softball diamond.

‘You’re almost ready, Andrew, but not yet. You should not have tried to stop the fire to save the woman Shadd. That was sentimentality.’

‘I wanted to save her life, Khomich, I didn’t send her out there as part of some devious power game.’

‘Everything men do is part of a power game. What you have to learn is that seizing power is easy enough — afterwards comes the hard part.’

A narrow wooden ladder went straight up the sheer face of rough brick. Khomich gestured for Steane to climb first. He hesitated.

‘Is it strong enough for both of us together?’

Khomich took hold of the ladder and shook it. Steane saw that it was secured to the brick wall only at the very top. ‘Would you prefer me to go first?’ Khomich asked.

Steane stared up the face of brick. ‘Why the hell did they stick the radio room in a remote place like that?’

‘If the building was attacked it would give the operator time to transmit for help.’

‘Who was supposed to be attacking Control?’

Khomich shrugged and started to climb. ‘Animals. Maybe floods. Maybe even full-size humans.’

Steane looked up at the soles of Khomich’s boots and above the boots, the tight bulges of heavy buttocks.

Against his better judgement he pulled himself onto the first rung of the flimsy ladder and started to climb.

Khomich was waiting for him on the high ledge, where a brick had been removed to make a sheltered niche for a rough wooden shack. A Security guard held out his hand to help Steane off the ladder. Steane irritably pushed the guard away. Khomich pointed out across the gloomy concrete floor of Glasshouse to the honeycomb lights of Control. The noise of the softball spectators was only a murmur at this distance.

‘There was a London garrison when the project was set up,’ he said. ‘Give those unspeakable scientists some credit, they tried to plan for all eventualities.’ Already, from the wooden radio shack, Steane could hear a crackle of static and a booming voice. Just before they ducked through a low doorway, Khomich touched his arm.

‘I was not neglecting the problem of Gudenian and the woman Hoessner, I was evaluating it. Did you expect me to send a battalion of guards to capture them?’

‘Maximum force has always been your answer, hasn’t it?’

Khomich looked grieved. ‘There would have been fighting the woman

and her child might have been killed.'

'Launching Wildfire in the middle of a drought seems a peculiar way of protecting their lives.'

'Rain! I am responsible for ten thousand lives here. Is it likely I would ignore the weather forecast?'

Steane felt totally defeated. He had underestimated Khomich at every step. Khomich snorted angrily and turned to shoulder his way through the low doorway into the wooden hut.

The Security guard gave him a sympathetic grimace. This made Steane even more despondent. People could *smell* these things, some kind of chemistry or vibration. No lousy Security guard ever gave Khomich little looks of comfort, that was sure!

He entered the radio hut prepared to ask Khomich to send him back to the merciful simplicities of the lowest ranks...

'... we have not seized power to satisfy devious personal ambitions,' boomed a man's voice from the big radio speakers. 'It was men of greed and egotistical vanities who led our brothers and sisters to their cruel deaths...'

It was a strangely intimate voice, even through storm static. In answer to Steane's questioning look, the radio operator nodded. 'That's Hallot. He's been—'

'Keep quiet,' Khomich growled.

The voice came and went in waves of distortion. Steane had a vision of groups of people huddled in small rooms throughout the vast stormy night, all waiting apprehensively as if for word from an omnipotent god.

'...is human and forgivable, but wilful crimes against the Divine order of Man and Nature must be punished. Science and materialism poisoned the earth. Science and materialism led us into the years of darkness...'

Khomich strained to hear as the crackling static drowned the voice again. 'Can't you operate this damn radio?'

The young operator showed no fear of Khomich. 'We've asked them a hundred times to have the big aerial fixed,' he grumbled. 'Can you get anybody to pay attention? Can you hell! I mean, what's the—'

'Shut up,' Steane barked.

The young operator gave him a resentful look. Khomich pushed nearer to the speaker.

'... millions died of a plague called science! In their name we demand atonement! In the name of the unborn children and...

Khomich went first down the ladder. Looking over the edge of the sheer drop down the brick wall, Steane saw how easy it would be to kick the flimsy attachment and send it crashing away from the wall. He turned sharply on the guard.

‘Who’s responsible for maintenance here?’

The guard shook his head. ‘I wouldn’t know, sir.’

‘This ladder’s a goddamn deathtrap!’

The guard waited until Steane had swung his leg out to balance on the third rung from the top, and was apprehensively bringing his whole weight onto the ladder. Looking down on Steane he smiled and said, ‘We’ve complained about the ladder but nothing happened, sir. You think maybe we should complain to this guy Hallot?’

Steane looked up from the level of the guard’s black boots. ‘What do you mean by that?’

The guard shrugged. ‘He seems more interested in keeping people alive than the bastards who shipped us off to this godforsaken hole. You think it’ll be long before they send out a rescue party?’

‘I don’t know what their priorities will be,’ Steane said brusquely. He climbed down quickly to where Khomich was waiting impatiently.

‘Well?’

Steane looked back up the sheer brick wall. High above, the guard’s face was a small white blur against the darkening afternoon light from the towering glass walls.

‘That guard just asked me when Hallot will be coming to rescue us!’

‘The same thought had occurred to me.’ They started walking back towards the distant lights of Control. ‘The man is clearly insane,’ Khomich said, ‘but is he worse than all the others?’

‘Only two days ago they were saying Hallot was encircled – I still can’t believe it! How could a handful of superstitious fanatics overthrow the whole WFC army?’

‘The army must have gone over to him.’ They were near enough now to hear the noise of the crowd watching the softball game. ‘People get tired of reality — superstition is comforting.’

‘I thought you might have agreed with him, knowing your views on scientists.’

Khomich grabbed him by the arm and swung him round. ‘Are you joking? This man will have us wiped off the face of the earth!’

Steane made no effort to free his arm. What had been menace before now seemed only the pathetic clutchings of an old, confused man.

‘We are *victims* of science.’

‘Are you telling *me* that?’ Khomich hissed. ‘I would hang all scientists by the heels over slow fires. Don’t you think I, too, have had secret hopes that one day ... We were cloned once, how do we *know* the process could not be reversed in some way?’

‘I know what the elected Council is going to say.’

Khomich nodded urgently. ‘They will want to divert all power to boost the transmitter and call Geneva, remind them of our existence, ask Hallot to come and rescue us—’

‘At least with proper support we could have a much easier life.’

Khomich growled in exasperation and nodded for them to head for the distant lights of the Control building.

Coming nearer the games area they heard angry shouting. A fight had broken out between supporters of the two teams, fieldworkers against machine-shop workers. The guards had carefully fallen back to the fringe of the mob. Men and women were screaming at each other; a few were punching and kicking in a whirling eddy of violence around which the other spectators ran this way and that to escape lashing boots and fists.

Seeing them, a guard made as if to intervene but Khomich strode towards him and grabbed his elbow. The guard nodded as Khomich rasped instructions.

Steane saw the guard waving at the other black-uniformed figures and they moved back. Khomich walked calmly away from the seething mob.

‘Why did you do that?’ Steane demanded.

Khomich shrugged. ‘Let them use up their energy — there are not enough guards. That is something you have to learn, Andrew — never show your hand until it holds the hammer.’

They passed unnoticed by the mob. Khomich pointed ahead to the warm light from the windows of Control. ‘News of Hallot’s victory will spread quickly. We must give the elected Council our assessment before they become excited by rumors.’

Steane saw two Security guards straightening quickly as they approached the ground-level entrance to the wooden building which housed the Colony’s administration. High above, beyond the towering walls of glass, night had fallen.

‘What is our assessment?’

Khomich gestured at him to wait until they had passed the guards. Their boots thudded on bare wooden planking as they entered a narrow wooden corridor under a harsh light. The heavy outside door slammed shut behind them.

Ahead was another heavy Security door with a small observation panel. Khomich made to rap on the door.

‘Don’t you want us to agree on a policy?’ Steane asked again.

The small blue eyes turned on him. ‘Maybe we do not agree. It is time for you to make up your mind on these matters. If you want to know what I think, I think Hallot will regard us as freaks to be destroyed, like obscene mutants. They will call it an act of mercy, putting us out of our misery. We were an embarrassment to the last administration – to Hallot we will be a blasphemy in the face of God.’ He banged on the heavy wooden door with his open palm. ‘That is what I will tell the Council. If you tell them that Hallot is our savior they will applaud you and make you commandant in my place.’ The observation panel slid open and Steane saw a pair of eyes inspecting them.

Khomich straightened his shoulder. ‘I want to do what’s best for the Colony,’ Steane hissed.

Khomich nodded. The door began to open. ‘This time you are not playing with one woman’s life, Andrew,’ he murmured. ‘No, ten thousand lives. Is the hammer in your hand?’

From all round her in the darkness came soft breathing. Unable to see what kind of creatures she had blundered amongst, Kirsten fought against screaming pain from her cramped legs until she could bear it no longer.

Slowly, expecting every moment to start a snarling explosion of animal savagery, she straightened her right leg, and then her left. She bit her lower lip to hold back a gasp as the red-hot pins and needles of returning blood tortured her thighs.

The warm, heavy flank against which she had stumbled gave a little shake. She held her breath. Other animals moved. She heard an indignant squeak. The heavy flank settled again.

She moved her arm a fraction at a time until her right hand was cupped over her mouth. She breathed again.

Despite her terror, she began to feel drowsy. Far away she could hear a soft whisper of wind. She fought against sleep, telling herself she had to escape before the creatures sensed her presence, but inexorably she succumbed to the pungent communal warmth of the huddled animals.

Chapter 16

Salvation!

Exactly as Khomich had prophesied, they went wild.

Khomich was still on his feet at the big polished section of oak when the hubbub began. Chief Engineer Reid, a somber Canadian, barely had time to explain how he could boost the transmitter's range to reach the Geneva receivers by diverting all electrical power from the wind-vanes.

Pandemonium.

Salvation was only one short radio transmission away!

In the harsh electric light of the windowless Table Room, the eighteen elected representatives shook hands and slapped each other on the back. Steane winced as some fool actually tried to hug Khomich!

That month's chairman, a black machine-shop overseer called Lentillac, saw Khomich standing impassively at the table, cut off in mid-sentence. Lentillac hammered with his gavel but nobody paid any attention.

Steane, seated on Khomich's left, looked up. Khomich had said this was what would happen, but when their eyes met the unspoken message in Khomich's face was not of superiority but a plea for help!

Steane looked away.

He had already made up his choice. It wasn't betrayal — it was simply facing up to reality. Nor was it personal ambition for power — he had convinced himself of that.

Khomich was asking the impossible. From the moment they heard of Hallot's victory there was no chance that the eighteen elected representatives would hesitate. Khomich just did not understand human nature.

The noise gradually subsided as Lentillac hammered for silence. 'Do I take it that the Council proposed to establish immediate radio contact with Geneva?'

Everybody in the room laughed.

Everybody except Steane and Khomich.

'Tell them to get a helicopter here by tomorrow,' shouted the curly-headed Challenor, one of the agricultural brigade's four members.

Khomich coughed dryly.

Lentillac frowned. 'Is there something you missed out, Commandant?' Khomich coughed again into his clenched fist.

To Steane it sounded like the first rumble of a dormant volcano. But he was not intimidated. No matter what happened in the crucial days ahead, he was better equipped to hold the Colony together than Khomich. Loyalty did not come into it. Ten thousand lives against one man's dignity?

Khomich began calmly. 'There are certain considerations the Council should be aware of—'

'How does this affect Security?' demanded a bullet-headed machinist called Gillick.

Steane saw the first flicker of suspicion in their eyes. They had always been frightened of Khomich and now they sensed that he wanted to spoil their blissful moment of salvation.

'Security means keeping people alive,' Khomich said, still calm.

'The best way to keep us all alive is to lift us out of this hellhole,' snapped Burrell, a stocky Irish-American mining engineer from the Diggings, the underground tunnel system that was to give the Colony an impenetrable underground fortress beneath the concrete floor of Glasshouse.

Khomich raised his hand in apology and turned away to clear his throat.

Steane felt more confident. Khomich was stalling for time. He could see no further ahead than his own loss of power and he no longer had the mental agility to keep in the saddle.

Khomich turned to face the ring of suspicious faces. He coughed again and patted his chest.

'Deputy Commandant Steane has full knowledge of the situation — he will give you our joint assessment.' His whole body shook with a violent fit of coughing and he sat down, reaching for the water jug. 'I have something in my throat,' he wheezed.

Steane stared in disbelief. There was nothing wrong with his throat!

Lentillac gestured for Steane to speak.

In prospect it had all seemed easy. By now he should have been reluctantly disagreeing with Khomich's pessimistic forecast that Hallot would destroy them. They would have seen him for the first time as fit to replace Khomich — young, maybe, but solid and dependable, and above all, reasonable. They all hated Khomich and at last they would have a credible alternative.

'We're waiting, Deputy Commandant,' Lentillac said irritably.

Khomich's maneuver was devastatingly simple. Steane was the only one who knew what Khomich would have told them. If he opened by disagreeing with Khomich, he would only look immature and petty. And Khomich could bide his time – maybe deny everything.

Sensing a rising impatience round the big polished table, Steane tried to give himself time to think.

'All we really know about Hallot is his hatred of science,' he began. 'Specifically he used the phrase, *Death to science and scientists*.'

'Hear, hear,' growled a burly woman agronomist called Woodburn. Steane looked down at Khomich. The small blue eyes waited innocently.

'The main consideration from our point of view is how Hallot and his quasi-religious followers will react to the existence of a scientific project which involved micro-cloning ten thousand people,' Steane went on, knowing he had to sound utterly mature and objective.

'He's come to *rescue* people from science,' Challenor protested.

Steane nodded. 'In all fairness, I should tell you what the commandant feels — I only wish he could speak for himself—'

Khomich nodded as a new bout of coughing made him turn away from the table.

Steane took a deep breath. 'The commandant reminded me of what happened when we all crossed-over initially. We were never again allowed physical confrontation or proximity with full-size people—'

'They thought we'd suffer a psychological trauma,' Lentillac interjected. 'After all what's happened to us, I think I am prepared to take the chance.'

Steane had to wait for silence.

'It was possible the scientists who planned Arcadia Two felt that full-size people might be shocked if they saw us.' A few faces frowned at this. Steane hesitated. By now, people should have been shouting Khomich down. 'There's something else — the commandant pointed out that the last administration regarded us a potential scandal. In fact, we've always had a slight notion they weren't unhappy about abandoning the Colony, in the hope that we might quietly perish and let them evade the whole issue of micro-cloning as a way of saving people from starvation.'

'Never mind the last administration,' Burrell snapped, 'Hallot's in control now and all those godamn scientists will be dangling from ropes!'

'We have the responsibility to discuss all the implications,' Steane said firmly, giving them every chance to assimilate his new air of authority.

Many of them had never heard him speak more than a few words. He could see respect for his maturity on one or two faces. ‘Suppose there is no way to reverse the process that brought us here? The commandant thinks Hallot will regard us as laboratory freaks and destroy us, either as an act of kindness to put us out of our misery or simply to wipe out a bizarre phenomenon which, to the superstitious mind, will seem evil and blasphemous. Now, I have to say...’

He hesitated, expecting an indignant outburst.

Instead, there was a strained silence.

They were all looking at Khomich!

Steane put his right hand on the table. ‘I see no reason why we cannot explain our position to Hallot and—’

‘Goddamnit, Khomich’s right!’ Gillick squeaked.

Khomich sat perfectly still, staring at a point in the middle of the table.

The woman Woodburn lost her temper. ‘This is crap! We didn’t ask to be micro-cloned, we were all tricked! Hallot isn’t going to punish us for —’

‘I want to hear what Khomich’s got to say,’ Reid barked.

Slowly the small blue eyes traveled up Steane’s uniform and came to rest on his face. The great cropped head nodded imperceptibly.

Steane felt himself sagging. He opened his mouth to speak and found nobody looking at him.

He sat down.

All trace of his cough gone, Khomich shrugged. ‘I was in Arcadia One. I remember when those pigs in Geneva decided once before that the scientists had meddled with Nature. They didn’t remember that we were victims — they sent flamethrowers to burn us off the face of the earth!’

He snapped his fingers.

Every eye in the room stared at his hand. Khomich stood up.

‘It is my belief that Hallot will be no better or worse than any other politician. What is important is that we face reality.’ He clasped his hands behind his back and began to walk up and down behind the seated delegates. ‘There is no going back for us. Never. There has been a recent sign that our people are beginning to lose their memories of *Before*. The doctors told me this was bad ... I welcomed it! We must all forget — we have no past. To survive is all.’ He gestured at Steane. ‘My deputy disagrees — he thinks we can expect this madman Hallot to feel pity for us and support us with food and fuel and equipment...’

Steane found himself being stared at by a ring of hostile eyes.

Khomich came round behind him and put his hand on his shoulder.

‘I tell you, Andrew, and all of you, if we do not hide ourselves away from the people who put us here – from all full-size humans — they will hunt us down and burn us like a plague of poisonous insects!’

Just for a moment, Steane felt a twinge of hope.

He saw Reid frowning.

People looked at each other. Khomich had gone too far in telling them they had no other future but life at micro-level. He made to ease the broad, peasant hand off his shoulder – just as a pulverizing explosion of sound waves burst on their ears.

The whole building shook.

The jug rolled over and smashed on the floor as water spewed across the polished table.

Boom... boom... people screwed up their faces and covered their ears. It was like thunder at close-range. The floor trembled and the electric bulbs danced crazily from the ceiling.

Steane saw Khomich already grabbing at people and shoving them towards the door. ‘Down to the tunnels!’ he was shouting. ‘Don’t use the elevator, go by the stairs!’

‘It must be an earthquake,’ Steane snapped, grabbing Khomich by the arm. ‘We should be getting them outside in the open.’

Khomich shook his head, pulling him out into the corridor. The thunderous reverberations suddenly stopped.

‘We’re being attacked,’ Khomich growled. ‘I will be at the Diggings entrance – you get the lights out and clear this building. In three minutes I will withdraw into the tunnels and seal the entrance. Get on with it, man!’

Already people were rushing to the stairs.

Steane fought his way against the panicking crowd and reached the red trip-lever at the elevator doors. He pulled it down and the corridor was thrown into darkness.

He was feeling his way back along the wall towards the stairs when he saw a faint light from the window at the other end of the corridor. He shouted at the people rushing along the corridor from the higher tiers, telling them to stick to the handrail that would lead them all the way down to the Diggings entrance. He wanted to run with them but it was his responsibility to see that nobody was left in the building. People were shouting and screaming but before he could yell at them to keep quiet on pain of being shot there was another massive shattering of glass.

Dark figures froze in the dimly-lit corridor.

A man started whimpering and then began to babble hysterically.

Steane drew his pistol and lashed out at the man's head. The man's scream was drowned by the smashing of huge shards of glass on the concrete floor of Glasshouse.

Steane growled at the people huddled against the wall to keep going down. He edged towards the window at the end of the corridor.

On that side, the wooden building faced along the south wall of Glasshouse. Looking out into cavernous space, he saw the towering wall of glass in pale, silvery moonlight.

He saw a glint from the floor and screwed up his eyes, trying to locate the massive pane which had been broken. Khomich was right. Something had launched an attack on Glasshouse, something large, a stray dog perhaps – it had always been feared that packs of domestic dogs gone wild would try to get into the great park. Yes, it had to be a dog.

The thought made him feel safer: they had weapons that could repel a dog, if not kill it. After all, they had killed a fox.

And then he saw, on the outside of the glass wall, a huge dark shape.

More glass smashed on concrete.

The whole building shook again.

Blood drained from Steane's face. Against white, scudding clouds, he made out the unmistakable silhouette of a man's head and shoulders...

A man who towered in the silvery moonlight like a giant from a nightmare, not a man but a titan...

Chapter 17

The first gray light of dawn creeping under the massive roundabout platform showed Kirsten a smooth flank of orange and black hairs, rising and falling in gentle, rhythmic breathing.

By then the heat was stifling her.

For what seemed like hours, she had crouched motionless among the sleeping animals, hardly daring to blink, her imagination running red with visions of savage teeth rending her flesh.

As soon as she could see well enough to move without bumping against the orange and black flank, she slowly stood up until she felt a draft of cold air on her face.

Her eyes began to make sense of the solid animal shapes. She saw fine whiskers and small ears. Suddenly she laughed.

Cavies! Or, as she had called them as a small girl years ago in Kristiansand — guinea pigs! Her favorite pets!

She had known that the field scouts and guards hunted animals called cavies for meat but she had never associated the name with these familiar creatures from a garden where, in her memory, the sun still shone and the bees still buzzed and her mother was eternally coming between the branches of apple blossom with cold lemonade.

The cavies stirred. There were small ones in the huddled group that had come together in the night of the storm. She remembered her own guinea pigs and the miracle of the babies, born fully equipped to run and eat from the moment they left the womb, perfect miniatures!

In a wave of affection for the warmth that had brought her through the night she almost caressed them. She moved between them with total confidence, almost regretting the coming of harsh daylight that would make it impossible for—

The first deafening crash of something heavy battering down on the wooden platform turned the sleeping cavies into a threshing, squeaking turmoil. They scattered, knocking her over, sharp claws from a thrusting hindleg ripping across her red and black jacket.

The crashing noise sent them scurrying in different directions. It was as if a giant pile-driver was smashing down on the massive timbers overhead.

She started to crawl towards the huge central support. Each battering impact made the huge platform shake and she waited for it to crash down and squash her flat.

Throwing herself against rusty iron, she cowered down, pressing her hands over her ears to shut out the pulverizing noise. Vibrations shook the central column.

She closed her eyes in terror. It happened as suddenly as if a switch had been thrown.

Hungry, hungry...

The messages came not in words but in colors and emotions. The color red flooded through her brain and the need to kill...

Kill, kill... and eat!

It was a voice and yet its words were blurred and distorted by vast waves of color and emotion.

The battering noises stopped. She heard something heavy crunching down on concrete, scraping on grit.

Vibrations came from beneath her.

She opened her eyes.

Kill, kill, kill came the voice, quieter now, fading into the distance.

She placed her palm on the concrete. The vibrations were still there but faint and then they stopped.

Silence.

Nothing moved in the gray light beyond the shadow of the massive roundabout.

She closed her eyes but the colors and emotions no longer came flooding into her brain.

Silence.

Slowly she got to her feet. *Something* had crossed the roundabout but what kind of animal to make all that noise?

She felt hungry.

It had sounded loud enough to be a horse but that was impossible. The high wall...

Everything had a rational explanation, she told herself. The noise must have been amplified by the wooden platform. Her own senses, heightened by fear and lack of food, had exaggerated everything ... it could have been a rabbit, or a dog or...

But that left the real question.

It hadn't been fantasy when she'd known what Sissons was thinking.

She had to face the possibility that she had acquired the faculty of extra-sensory perception. It wasn't imagination – she had heard the

creature that had passed overhead, heard it planning to kill to ease its hunger, heard its thoughts...

But was that so strange? Suppose her brain had tapped some latent trace of the ESP faculty not quite obliterated by evolution ... animals had very similar brains to ours, didn't they? Undeveloped by human standards, of course, but wasn't that another example of the arrogance that had led Man to disaster? Animals had retained full use of faculties that we had largely lost – like smell, the direction-finding equipment of homing pigeons ... animals shared the basic emotions with us — fear and hunger and pleasure. We used speech to communicate – perhaps they had never needed to develop speech as a tool because they could communicate with transmitted pictures and colors.

Why shouldn't a human brain with a tendency to ESP be able to pick up a flood of basic emotion from the electrical waves of an animal brain? Why shouldn't—

She shook her head, angry at herself for wasting time on conjecture. Staying alive was her problem now. Finding something to eat, looking for Dirk...

As she moved cautiously under the massive timbers towards the light, she kept hoping to see Dirk coming grinning towards her. For a moment, under the rim of the roundabout, she even wished the covies would come back, so utterly alone did she feel in that shining, silent world. She looked out on a wet landscape of blackened shapes. There was no sign of the creature that had thundered across the roundabout.

She remembered then that she had lost her pack. She had no field rations, no weapon, no Prod, no map, no radio.

She looked for sunlight to give her some idea of direction but the sky was a full, uniform gray. In any case, which direction did she want?

Dirk must have died in the fire. She was entirely on her own and nobody was coming to rescue her because nobody knew where she was. Bagley was dead and Sissons and—

The snake!

Didn't snakes spend the night coiled up in dark places?

She ran quickly from under the shadow of the massive roundabout, heading for the distorted lumps of plastic, her boots scuffing a trail through a sodden layer of dead insect shells. In quick springs she ran between metal pillars and walls of charred wood, crossing the concrete playground towards a gaunt landscape of jagged trunks and scorched earth.

Nothing moved in the sky or on the ground as she found a way down

off the concrete plateau into a world devastated by Man's fire.

She cupped her hands and ran them under a twisted branch, catching dew to gulp. The ravaging of the fire had opened up the terrain, making it easy to pick a way across stones and earth, remembering some of the things Sissons had told her: keeping down in fissures and hollows; never appearing against the skyline unless it was absolutely necessary and then slowly and cautiously; making sure there was nothing lurking in the next earth trench or behind the next big stone.

She drank again from drops hanging on the shriveled skeleton of a low, thick shrub that now stood, stark and gaunt like an old hangman's gibbet.

The water temporarily eased her hunger but she knew she needed solid nourishment against the heat loss which Sissons had explained was their main handicap at this size.

If only Sissons had not forgotten his own lessons...

Crouching behind a lump of fire-crustured earth, she told herself to ignore the vastness of the scorched desert in which she seemed to be the only living creature.

She saw something yellow in the wet, black earth, a root of some kind. She pulled it free and broke off a piece. Sissons had given her a list of plants and insects that the field scouts ate in emergencies like this but at the time she had been too preoccupied to listen.

Were roots poisonous?

She bit into it tentatively. The taste was something like raw potatoes. She chewed slowly, working up her courage to swallow. It seemed to be all stringy fiber. She remembered something else Sissons had said — how people panicked and used up energy reserves before they'd taken time to evaluate a situation. The main factor was food. You had to make a careful choice — whether to cover as much distance as possible before you became weak through hunger, or whether to sit tight and let help come to you.

It seemed to be lighter now. She moved round the big lump of earth and clawed her way across steep rough ground, cautiously peering over the highest level. The trunk of a big bush had survived the fire and she headed towards it, her boots kicking through grass burned black and brittle.

Looking back from the shelter of the big, charred trunk, she saw her own tracks through the wet grass and realized they would lead any predator right to her. She looked up but there were no jutting branches for her to climb onto.

She went round to the other side of the trunk. Ahead, through the still gray light of early morning, she thought she saw a blur of color, yellow perhaps, it was hard to tell.

As far as she could remember, she had come off the concrete playground on the side away from the Sandpit, and gone in a Straight line ever since, which meant she was facing away from Glasshouse. If only the sun would appear, she could tell east from west. She could go back and find the Sandpit – at least that would establish her position in relation to Glasshouse.

But the fire would have destroyed all sources of food in that whole area. She might wander for days in the burned out Jungle before she was rescued...

And how did she know they wanted to rescue her?

She chewed slowly on the wad of root fibers, willing herself not to panic.

Considered analytically, she was facing the classic dilemma of any undercover agent who had lost contact with control.

Control was Steane. Why had he allowed them to start Wildfire when he must have assumed she was still in the Jungle with Bagley's patrol? But for Sissons... she shuddered and bit on her knuckle, telling herself to *concentrate*.

Had Steane had any reason for wanting her dead? She shook her head. No, she had taken part in no conspiracies or power games.

But Steane might have!

The more she thought about it, the more convinced she became. There must be more to it than a simple attempt to infiltrate Gudenian's renegades. Why all the secrecy? No, it had to be part of a bigger scheme. No man reached Steane's position at his age without knowing how to be devious.

Who stood to benefit?

Steane did. Bringing Gudenian and the woman he'd got pregnant back into the Colony would be a big boost for him. She had to assume he'd thought up the whole idea on his own and mentioned it to nobody else ... which meant Khomich.

Steane was making a bid to take over from Khomich!

Yes, that was it, had to be!

So why had he not stopped Wildfire! Maybe he couldn't – did that mean Khomich had found out? Was Steane now under arrest? Or was it just as Sissons had guessed — the prospect of rain had panicked them into starting Wildfire earlier than scheduled?

Steane would have been faced then with admitting what he'd done behind Khomich's back or letting her die. She'd worked for men like him most of her adult life and she knew exactly how far they'd risk their own necks to save the life of one undercover agent.

In the end, there was no choice.

If she went back now she could only be a serious embarrassment to Steane. She had to carry out the assignment, that was all. Then it wouldn't matter *who* had won the struggle for power, Khomich or Steane or anybody else, it would be a triumph for somebody ... and she would be allowed to live.

When rainbows began appearing in all directions, rising above the wet, blackened terrain ahead and from the bare branches jutting against the sky, she spat out the wad of root fibers and screwed up her eyes to locate the blur of color she had seen beyond the black landscape.

The first direct rays of sunlight told her she was facing roughly north towards the lake that Sissons had shown her on the map. She heard a faint buzz of insects. Leaving the blackened bush and moving out towards rainbows that disappeared as soon as she approached, she felt a tingle of excitement.

Cynical masters could abandon the undercover agent to live or die but they would never experience the physical thrill of survival at the very limit of endurance — a thrill that was positively sexual.

Ten or fifteen minutes later, passing the almost unrecognizable carcass of a baby rabbit burned by the fire, she saw a wall of shriveled leaves rising up from the black desert. The ground sloped and soon she was pushing through lush vegetation, hearing the full buzzings and clicking of the insects. The lower ground had been marshy enough to stand up to the drought, she realized – soon it became hot and humid and small jumping insects and flies erupted in front of her. Skirting a massive bank of hawser-thick stems with vicious thorns, she came on a gigantic metal girder rising out of the thick greenery, dotted here and there with orange fungus.

She was going to make a detour to avoid the dangerous looking dark spaces under the rusty girder when her eye caught a glint of something shiny and black.

Blackberries!

Even then, she forced herself to wait and watch, remembering how the scaled body of the snake had suddenly erupted from nowhere. She saw that the girder was part of an old gate, now hanging on one rusty hinge from a square wooden post that towered far above the range of

her vision. She heard a chattering of birds. A big brown spider was moving up the rotting surface of the post.

She waited until it had disappeared before she picked her way through the tall, wet grass and weeds and dragged herself up onto the rusting iron pillar.

It creaked slightly under her weight. She crouched on all fours, fingers sinking into flaking rust, then moved slowly higher, until she was level with the hanging spray of blackberries. She reached out and brought the heavy berries nearer.

They were as big as melons!

She almost overbalanced pulling one of the segmented berries free and it rolled across the girder and fell off into the thick weeds. She made no mistake the second time and carried the berry to an angle between the girder and a thicker cross-section, her boots dangling just above green leaves as she ripped into red juice and flesh.

There was a slight breeze and she opened her jacket at the neck to let the cool air dry her sweat. Bitter-sweet juice ran down her chin as she wolfed into the globular drupes that made up the berry.

Something shiny moved across her vision.

When she looked up, she saw a big brown spider on the tilted gatepost.

A length of gossamer-rope dangled over her, twirling gently in the breeze as the spider pulled it back up. She was close enough to see the twin spinnaret protuberances bulging from the hairy abdomen.

The spider seemed to be eating the gossamer rope. She watched it clinging to the rough wooden surface — then a new length of gossamer appeared from the tip of the abdomen and the breeze caught it, wafting it out into space.

This time the delicate rope fastened on a curved blackberry stem.

The spider tugged on the thin line that stretched out between the post and the bush. It held. Legs stretched widely apart, it began to climb along the single strand, eating it as it went, spinning a thicker strand behind, its body bridging the gap.

A thin strand suddenly lurched and broke away from a shaking blackberry leaf. The spider swung down on the end of the thick strand, hitting the post. Immediately it climbed again, eating the trailing white gossamer.

She saw now what it was doing, understanding for the first time how a spider managed to stretch the first high strand from which a web could be slung. The spinnarets cast a fine line into space and the wind

then carried it across space until it stuck to something.

She went on eating the blackberry. The spider cast its line again. This time the breeze took the shiny strand towards a thicker blackberry stem and it stuck firm.

The spider moved along the fine line, eating as it went, spinning a thicker line behind, its legs firmly gripping the thin strand that sagged dangerously under its weight. When it reached the blackberry stem and fastened the thicker strand, it came back again, spinning a second thick strand parallel to the first.

Now it had two thick strands spanning the chasm between the gatepost and the bush. It climbed out to the middle and began lowering itself towards the ground on yet another strand being spun out of its big round body, disappearing down into the weeds.

Kirsten peered over the edge.

Sure enough, the spider came quickly back up the vertical strand that was now attached at a slight angle between the cross-strand and the ground.

Kirsten smiled. It was precision engineering and she had seen at first hand how—

A shadow fell across the iron gate. A vast shape came towering out of the sun. She had a glimpse of something huge crashing through the delicate strands before the wooden slat shuddered.

Wood splintered with a rotten, tearing sound and she was thrown backwards off the girder, her arms threshing wildly as she tried to grab at grass stalks and big leaves.

There was a noise from the sky like that of a mighty tornado.

Struggling upside down among wet, yellow stems that had broken her fall, she found herself looking up at a massive flat surface coming hammering down on leaves and stalks like a battering ram from the sky.

Only inches from her face, she saw a black curve with a dimpled surface.

It rose again and above it she saw a towering brown column.

Agony, agony... the searing voice screamed with pain.

She realized that she was looking up at a man's boot... a boot big enough to crush her into oblivion.

Chapter 18

‘Bastard!’

He was a deceptively slim-looking man wearing a black army beret, a brown leather jacket and heavy cotton trousers tucked neatly into calf-length field boots. He was in his late twenties, with a high, broad forehead and honest blue eyes. People never showed surprise when he told them he was an ex-army doctor.

His name was Parr and in the last ten days he had slaughtered two whole families.

Hopping with pain and cursing viciously, he kicked the hidden iron gate which had cracked against his shin.

His boots, taken from the last farmhouse beyond the river, where a man and his wife and three teenage children now lay in dried pools of blood, made no satisfactory impression on the wrought-iron grille.

Parr had been in a ferocious temper since cutting his hand on broken glass the night before, when he’d failed to break into a big glass hothouse. A cold night in a ruined brick shed had not helped his over-developed sense of grievance. Then carelessness had cost him the chance of roasting some of the sleek covies that had scattered across a kids’ old playground.

Parr’s psychopathic rages knew no logic — his world was a uniformly hostile place where an inanimate object could be just as much his enemy as a farmer who grudged him food.

Kicking the iron gate did not relieve his indignation.

He took a sharp, hissing breath, slid off his nylon pack and put it down with his double-barrelled shotgun. He took off the old-fashioned German binoculars that hung round his neck on a leather strap and placed them on the nylon pack.

Methodically, he dragged the gate free of clinging bramble-stems and weeds and lifted it high above his head, arms extended.

For a moment he posed in weight-lifter style, letting the unseen audience admire the strength of his arms.

‘Bastard thing,’ he grunted, contemptuously hurling the gate into the thick of the brambles.

Everything Parr did was for the benefit of a hostile audience that

existed only in his imagination.

A black and orange cavy darted out from the wet undergrowth. This time there was no carelessness. He dived headlong.

There was a quick squeal and it wriggled under his body. His fingers clamped into its solid flanks and he stood up, holding it by the hindlegs.

It tried to twist to bite his hand. 'Are you somebody's pet?'

He swung the cavy in a short arc, smacking its head against the old gate-post.

For a moment he listened for human sounds, then sat cross-legged and opened the nylon pack, finding a square of blue silk to wrap the dead cavy in. He remembered the fierce struggles of the girl who owned the silk scarf and he smiled — everything came in useful sooner or later.

He placed the carcass among what he called his treasure, all the useful items he'd picked up since he'd decided to leave London, where starving people roamed like wolf-packs... ammunition, salt, sugar, coffee, chocolate bars, matches, jewelry, gold coins wrapped in tissue paper ... treasure for which he had murdered at least eleven people, all of it good for barter if he ever ran into people he could not kill.

He fastened the pack again and pulled the binoculars strap over his head. He checked the heavy pistol stuck in his belt and the knife strapped to his right calf.

His hand was throbbing and he knew he had to light a fire and cauterize the cut with a red-hot knife. Pain meant nothing to Parr — unless he was inflicting it.

Pulling on the pack and balancing the shotgun in the crook of his right arm, he moved cautiously round the big clump of brambles, alert for any movement or sound from the surrounding trees and bushes. There had to be people in a place like this, had to be ... the sun's rays on a piece of broken glass might have started that fire but...

He picked a few blackberries and decided to make for a line of bushes at the top of a low slope. He *sensed* people.

The night before, creeping through the overgrown gardens and pathways that indicated this had been a public park or the grounds of a mansion, he'd caught sight of what he thought was electric light from a big ornamental hothouse.

Afterwards he'd decided it must have been a reflection of moonlight yet he was still puzzled by the way the door had been nailed up; what did people have to protect in a hothouse? And there were vegetables growing in recently-tended patches, with a net to keep birds off!

Once he'd reconnoitred the whole area behind the wall, he'd make a

proper investigation of that glasshouse...

It took him five minutes to reach the juniper bushes at the top of the low slope. He checked the time with a heavy gold watch attached to his belt by a gold chain, beginning to build a mental picture of the park's layout and distances. The watch was more than a hundred years old, the property of that farmer with the two daughters. It kept going without a battery, which to Parr seemed quite amusing. There was a lot of treasure like the watch to be picked up in these country areas.

Parr had been in the army and he'd seen what happened in the big cities as the WFC garrisons gradually lost control. Once the roving bands of looters and family gangs had cleaned out London's hidden foodstores, these country areas would *really* know what the future was going to be like.

He saw a brown rabbit darting from a bank of rhododendrons. This place looked better and better. If these people could afford to let rabbits roam wild they must have plenty of food.

Coming up the slope, he saw a glimpse of water through the juniper bushes. He got down on his stomach and wriggled forward.

It was a big ornamental lake with exposed mud where the drought had lowered the level. He saw black waterhens and swooping swallows. Out in the middle he saw the ripples of fish catching flies.

Better and better.

Five mallard ducks came zooming low over rhododendron bushes and splayed their webbed feet as water-brakes to come to rest on the shining water.

'You've found a little paradise here, Francis, old chap,' he muttered. So where were the people?

As he skirted the reedy shores of the lake, he heard ducks quacking and saw big dragonflies darting across the surface. There was a splash and a swirl of water as a big fish broke water and disappeared again with a flash of scales.

He came on a series of stepped flagstones down which ran a steady trickle of rainwater in little waterfalls. He stepped across the flagstones and looked down into a linked series of small, deep pools. Moving slowly among green algae, he saw a big silver fish which he recognized as a Japanese koi carp.

He frowned.

Nobody had this much food to spare.

A few miles away, beyond the woods on the other side of the river, isolated farming communities guarded small fields of potatoes night and

day. Men were killing each other for mangy sheep.

He scanned the ground ahead for tripwires and mantraps. *Something* was guarding this place and it had to be something pretty ferocious.

He hesitated, seeing a small coppice of trees on higher ground beyond the curve of the lake. The sun was quite high now and little wisps of steam rose from bare earth. Somewhere a duck quacked noisily.

It went on quacking. It sounded frantic.

Parr moved quickly, keeping to the shadows, getting his finger on the shotgun trigger guard.

He wasn't the only hunter in this eery paradise.

‘Get back, you!’ Gudenian roared but Cunningham had the madness. With a ferocious yell, he ran out towards the huge duck, wielding a long spear in both hands.

Gudenian turned on the rope teams. ‘Pull it off its feet!’ They threw themselves with near desperation on both ends of the tautly jerking rope that was firmly looped round the duck’s neck. Giant wings battered frantically on wet ground, blasting water and stinging mud in their faces. There was no escape for the duck but killing it was something else.

Gudenian hurled himself on the end of the rope that was fixed to the stone balustrade. His extra weight made no difference. Cunningham was dodging a flapping wing to get in front of the duck.

‘It’s too big!’ Abram shouted. ‘You’ll have to cut it free!’

‘I know how bloody big it is, you!’ Gudenian snarled. He ran across the flagstone and joined the five men pulling on the other end of the rope tied to a bush trunk. They should have fixed the two ends of the rope farther apart, to make a wider angle for leverage. But to hell with cutting it free!

Webbed feet scrabbled on wet earth. The duck was trying to run and fly at the same time, continually being jerked back by the unbreakable grass rope. The webbed feet slipped and the big feathered body flopped to the ground.

Cunningham ran at the duck’s head, jabbing the firehardened spear up at its eye. He was shouting like a maniac.

Suddenly, the madness seized them all.

They abandoned the rope and grabbed at spears.

Gudenian didn’t try to stop them. This was what hunting was all about. He screamed at Abram to snatch up a second rope lying in loose

coils.

The duck launched itself off the ground.

The heavy bone at the front angle of its left wing smashed straight down on Cunningham's head. Gudenian saw him go down in a broken heap.

Pulverizing wings smashed down among the hunters, scattering them and their spears.

Gudenian and Abram ran under the thick feathers of the duck's belly, dragging the rope against its scaly legs. Abram was knocked flat but he came up again and they crossed over, running in a low crouch, looping the rope round the big, hard legs.

For a moment Gudenian was suffocated in a stinking warmth of feathers. He rolled sideways. Somebody else had grabbed the rope.

They began to work as a team then, looping the rope round the scaly legs, pulling it tighter and tighter until the duck collapsed, flopping forward on its breast.

Giant wings still battered on wet earth and the big flat bill jabbed viciously with lightning speed. Exultant with the madness they came at it from all sides, Gudenian yelling and cursing with everybody else as they drove fire-hardened spears at the bright eyes and hurled themselves on the feathered neck, stabbing and slashing and cutting until the long, hard neck went limp and the wings stretched and flapped for the last time.

Cunningham's spear was still tightly clutched in a hamlike fist. The rest of him was barely recognizable as the big cheerful man Gudenian remembered as a field guard back in the Colony.

'Broke just about every bone in his body,' Abram said in a low, awed voice.

Gudenian's chest was still heaving. He gestured at the nine men in animal pelts, forcing them to look at Cunningham's broken body.

'That's what happens when you forget,' he growled. 'Don't turn your head away, Limpkin – I want you to remember this. We don't have to prove anything — none of us would be here if we didn't have guts. But it's brains that'll keep us alive, not being heroes.' He tapped his right temple. 'Think! Right? Okay, get his clothes off...'

While the others started fixing ropes to the duck, he and Abram dragged Cunningham's naked corpse to the stone balustrade. Gudenian pushed it over the edge with his boot. There was a splash and they saw a sluggish movement of muddy water bumping the naked corpse towards the lake.

‘We should have proper burials,’ Abram protested.

‘You want a cemetery with headstones?’

‘A man isn’t a lump of meat.’

‘What’s the difference — the fish get him or the worms.’

Chernitz stared down at the muddy ditch. ‘You sure this is the way we should be living, Gudenian?’

The big blond man turned on him slowly. ‘You can go back to Glasshouse any time, Abram.’

Abram had been with Gudenian from the start, since they’d first broken out of Glasshouse the year before, but he knew better than push it. Gudenian had a different kind of madness...

‘Okay, this is what we’ll do,’ Gudenian said when they had the duck roped for the long haul back. ‘All that rain means it’ll be safe to have a fire. Sooner we roast this brute the better — we can cut it up afterwards. Sol, Peter, you go back to the camp and bring everybody to that place we saw, you know, the hole near the dead bush? Tell Manuel we’ll be away from the camp for about two days, we’ll probably hole up at the Roots...’

He waved at them and they took the ropes on their shoulders and began to haul the big feathered carcass up the slope away from the stone balustrade. Gudenian fell to the rear, the hunting party’s only rifle over his shoulder. On balance it wasn’t turning out too bad. The duck meant fresh meat for seven or eight days. Cunningham didn’t have a woman so there would be no tension on that score, with the single men wondering which of them the dead man’s woman would pick. He heard them laughing as they bent nearly double under the ropes. He blamed himself for Big Jim’s death: no matter what crazy ideas people got, the responsibility for educating them was his, but if you went too far with discipline you could knock the recklessness out of them altogether and then they’d be no good as hunters.

‘You feeling happy, you?’ he barked, catching up with them and walking backwards so that they could see his face. ‘You going to feel so happy when all this goddamn noise brings the big crows down? Killing a lousy duck? That was the easy part. Wait till the flies pick up the scent! Get your backs into it, you lazy bastards!’

They knew he was in a good mood. They shouted cheerful obscenities and he pretended to use the other rope as a whip for their backs. Cunningham was the third man they’d lost and he’d noticed something strange about human psychology each time.

In the Wilds, violent death made people feel *good*! They put on a show

of sad faces but all the time they were thinking if it has to happen, better him than me!

He made them wait at the top of the slope while he scanned the flat ground between them and the dying daffodil stalks which they would have to go through to reach the dead bush... The sky was blue. Crows were the only real danger – there was nothing big enough in the park to take the duck away from them but the big black birds could swoop down in a flash and snap one of them up as easily as a day-old duckling.

Bragg had been taken by crows — a tough young kid who'd even managed to fire off a few shots. The big hard beaks had pulled him in three different directions at once...

He went on scanning the sky and the ground ahead. Caution was a habit that kept you alive – one day another fox might get into the park. Flies were already buzzing over the feathered carcass. They had rubbed wet mud on the mangled eye-sockets but you couldn't disguise the smell of flesh, not in the Wilds. However, insects were more of a nuisance than a threat, once you knew their habits.

Satisfied at last, he waved them on, growling at the two lines of straining men to cross the open ground as fast as possible.

The duck bumped over stones and tufts of dead grass. He didn't lend a hand on the rope — not for any reasons of status but because somebody had to keep on the lookout. People got killed with that kind of sloppy thinking. He heard Allison saying they should've kept the duck alive and made it walk to the roasting pit on the end of a rope. The others jeered but young Mal persisted.

'It would work with one of them half-grown birds,' he argued.

Gudenian grinned. 'Yeah, maybe you could train one to fly with us on its back, Mal.'

Allison persisted. 'Maybe not with ducks but it would work with covies, wouldn't it?'

'Save your breath and pull your goddamn weight, you,' Gudenian snapped.

Only Abram thought he knew why he'd smacked Allison down so brutally. Gudenian wanted them too enjoy hunting. The rest of them saw it as a necessity. If anybody came up with a safer way to keep their bellies full they would vote for it to a man.

Straining on the rope that was dragging on his shoulder, Abram kept the big blond man in sight, wishing he could persuade Gudenian to take account of human nature. He'd tried to tell him that people didn't like uncertainty, not day after day; the search for a safe, routine way of

getting food was as old as the human race itself and—

He saw Gudenian freeze. He was instantly alert, following Gudenian's gaze across the rough, open ground to the plantation of dying daffodil stalks.

Then Gudenian relaxed and dropped back towards the two lines of men hauling on the rope. Casually, without looking anywhere in particular, he made them stop. He pretended to scan the sky. Anybody watching would see nothing unusual — he was giving his hunting party a short rest. Some of them were already flopping to the ground. He rubbed sweat from his forehead.

Through the angle of his arm he saw the movement again.

Even at that distance there was no mistaking the red and black uniform.

He swung his rifle up to rest across the back of his neck, with his arms hooked over the ends, looking relaxed.

'We're being watched,' he said quickly. 'Don't look, don't ask questions.' The freckly-faced Limpkin immediately swiveled his head to scan the open ground. Gudenian jabbed at him with his tough leather moccasin. 'I said don't look, you!' Limpkin blushed. Gudenian started strolling up and down, as if lecturing them. 'There's a Glasshouse field scout in the daffodils, almost straight ahead. Remember that encircling routine we practised? Okay, when I reach three... one...two... *three!*'

Kirsten winced at the pain in her shoulder. She cautiously touched her upper arm, thinking she might have broken a bone.

When she peered out again from the clump of dead stalks they had vanished!

She screwed up her eyes and rubbed them with her knuckles.

The ropes were still trailing round the big brown duck but there was no trace of the eleven men in smooth animal pelts.

She waited.

Somebody had to be told!

Insects buzzed all round her. A small red ant came hurrying across the dead grass between the clumps of daffodil stalks, its antennae flicking in all directions.

She *had* to tell them, but she knew they'd shoot a red and black on sight. She'd been planning to let them find her apparently unconscious as they came across the open ground...

Big flies zoomed out of the blue sky and landed on the duck. She

heard the angrier buzz of wasps. A shadow in the sky made her jump, expecting the giant boot to come stamping down on her.

She leaned back against the hard stalks, trying to ease her shoulder. Something touched her foot.

When she looked down, the red ant was on her boot.

No!

Closing his left eye, Gudenian squinted along the rifle sights, lying on his stomach in the shadow of the duck's jutting tail. The red and black was hiding in the stalks. He looked back over his shoulder but saw only hummocks of dead grass and big stones. They'd be circling round in both directions to get behind the daffodil stalks. Surprise was their only hope and he didn't think it would work. He cursed himself for bringing only one rifle. Spears would be no good against a platoon of well-armed red and blacks. They had rifles and ammunition back at the camp but he'd made it a rule they were to be used only in the last resort — survival in the long term depended on using natural technology.

The rifle barrel veered from side to side as he looked for a movement among the yellow stalks.

Maybe it wasn't a platoon, maybe it was the whole Glasshouse army! He licked salty sweat off the blond stubble round his mouth. He'd always hoped that by keeping as far away from Glasshouse as possible he'd made Khomich believe they'd perished out here in the Wilds. The fire should have warned him – Khomich wasn't the kind of man to give up. Magda and the baby were—

He frowned.

A solitary figure in the red and black uniform of a Glasshouse field scout was staggering out of the yellow stalks.

His finger rested on the trigger.

The field scout had no hat and no weapons. He was shouting something. He had fair hair.

It had to be a trick.

His finger began to tighten on the trigger.

The red and black lost his balance and crashed to the ground. Gudenian heard a cry of pain.

It was a woman!

That made up his mind. Using a woman as bait? He aimed at the fair hair as she started to crawl towards him on hands and knees. Tricks only worked if you gave them time to arouse your curiosity.

She got to her feet before he could fire.

He heard her shouting. 'Gudenian!' She was waving her arms, trying to run towards the duck. 'Gudenian...'

The trigger was moving back as a sinuous red shape came darting across his vision. A pointed animal head with small ears was rushing straight at the fair-haired woman!

Chapter 19

Like a streak of red death, the weasel came in a low, fast rush.

Kirsten heard it before she saw it. When she turned it was almost on her, rich brown hairs glistening on the sleek head and snaky body.

She didn't have time to scream.

She was looking at rows of pointed teeth as a soft-nosed bullet exploded into the weasel's flank.

It let out a horrific squeal. Short brown legs skidded on stone and earth. Dust rose in a flurry. The weasel was bowled over, showing its white belly, its jaws snapping at the pain in its side.

Kirsten started to run but the dust and the squeals and the rich brown hairs seemed to be all around her. She was screaming as she slumped forward on her knees, covering her face.

Out of the stalks erupted the men in cavy pelt jackets and trousers, men who yelled and screamed and danced to hide their own terror as they ran to form a murderous circle of spears round the demented weasel...

The catwalk ended abruptly in a jagged edge. It swayed a little and creaked under their boots.

Pulling aside a fold of torn net, Steane looked down at the black earth of the carrot field.

Khomich was shaking his head.

Steane wondered for a moment if Khomich's eyesight was worse than he'd imagined. 'Can you see it?' he asked, Starting to point.

Khomich pushed him away. 'Of course I see it.'

Among a wreckage of broken pylon supports and crushed stalks, a huge footprint pointed towards the towering shimmer of Glasshouse. They could see the ridges made by a rubber heel.

Steane's eyes followed the direction of the toe. He pointed up to a broken pane of glass in the top half of a huge door. A giant triangle of glass hung out at a crazy angle.

'It's the one thing that was never supposed to happen,' he said.

'Why do you think we dig the tunnels?' Khomich retorted. 'It was

always a probability.'

'We were supposed to be protected,' Steane said bitterly. 'Did they really think this place could go undetected for ever?'

Khomich turned away from the sheer drop. 'They put up signs to make people think it was a research site for bacteriological warfare.'

'Fine, as long as all marauders can read,' Steane muttered.

Khomich made no reply. They went back along the creaking catwalk and climbed down a long wooden ladder. The fields were deserted. Under the intact section of the Net that had been designed as a protection against birds, they made their way through carrot stalks towering like green plumes. Newly soaked earth clung to their soles. They crossed the lines of the rail network that ran out from Glasshouse. All the hand-operated buggy cars had been taken inside but there was no quick way of hiding or disguising the rails. Steane looked up at the Net.

'We're lucky he came in the dark...'

There was a hint of amusement in Khomich's voice. 'Isn't this what you wanted?'

'You know goddamn well it isn't! I was talking about asking Geneva for supportive action ...' his voice tailed off. They were passing another giant footprint. Beyond it was another ... and another.

Khomich hardly seemed to notice them.

'Andrew, you know what they'll say, don't you?'

'They'll be scared witless, I know that. As a matter of fact, I'm scared.'

Khomich frowned. 'You think I'm any different? Don't you think I would like to radio *somebody* for help?'

Steane was immediately wary. In the last two days he had learned that Khomich's capacity for trickery was endless. The small blue eyes were almost pleading with him and that made him more suspicious.

'You don't trust me?' Khomich demanded.

'Does it matter to you?'

'It does now.'

'Why? Because you know the Council is going to insist on making contact with Geneva whatever you say?' Khomich nodded. Steane shrugged. 'What difference does it make what I think?'

Khomich took hold of his arm but quickly removed his hand when he felt Steane pulling away.

'Whatever I do is to keep these people alive,' Khomich said with a vehemence that startled Steane. 'I used to work for Commissioners — directly under their orders — I know what those bureaucrats are like!

They called me the Butcher!’ He growled angrily, walking faster, his hands clenched at his sides. ‘I could have told them who was giving orders that would cause thousands of people to die!’ He turned on Steane, his broad, pink face flushed with indignation. ‘I was a soldier and I obeyed orders given to me by the legitimately appointed authority! I *stopped* riots and massacres – of course criminals were executed! But what would you prefer – a firing squad for twenty gangsters or the rule of anarchy? Would women and children eat if I allowed a mob of wolves to rule the streets? Tell me — was I wrong?’

‘All that’s in the distant past, Khomich, this is a totally different situation.’

‘A madman’s in control. What’s different?’

Steane pointed back at the footprints. ‘That’s what’s different.’

‘A few footprints? Can you imagine how many more footprints Hallot’s men would make?’

‘We need protection.’

‘A man who says death to science and scientists is going to *protect* us?’

‘For god sakes! The number of times I’ve heard you saying you’d string every living scientist from the end of a rope!’

Khomich looked hurt. ‘The only man I ever trusted in my whole life was a scientist! It was science that brought Mankind out of darkness. I would only hang the ones who play games with people’s lives. Hallot wants to go back to the Stone Age! Andrew, I’ve been among men like him for most of my life. Believe me, I know the tone of voice. He wasn’t promising a new future, he was announcing a bloodbath!’

Steane told himself angrily not to be seduced by yet another example of Khomich’s trickery.

‘We may be taking a risk with Hallot but—’

‘You admit there’s a *risk*?’

Steane grimaced. He kept seeing an image of the foot that had made the footprints, and of all the feet that would crush down on the earth on which they were standing, and of towering shapes that would darken the sky.

Khomich waited, his face tense with anticipation.

‘Yes, there’s a risk that Hallot will have us all destroyed,’ Steane said calmly.

‘I knew you would—’

‘What I think doesn’t matter, Khomich, it’s what the Council will think and every man and woman in the Colony. They’re terrified, Khomich, they’ll trample you into the ground in a rush to reach the radio.’ He

looked at the massive wall of brick ahead of them. 'In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if they'd already made the decision to call Geneva.'

'But you agree with me?'

Steane hesitated.

Khomich's chin sank on his chest. His hands clenched into fists that beat slowly against his tightly-uniformed thighs. Steane waited coldly for the inevitable explosion.

Instead, Khomich suddenly relaxed. He pointed towards the high brick wall at the base of Glasshouse. 'They are waiting for us.' He didn't speak again until they were within sight of the concrete slope at the foot of the wall.

'I could swear a sacred oath that I am thinking objectively. I could tell you that I am one of the ten thousand people whose lives are at stake.' He spoke quietly, looking straight ahead. 'My brain tells me I am right, my heart tells me I am right, my belly tells me. The moment Hallot knows of our existence we are doomed. But how can I convince you? The Council will not listen to *me*.'

'Does that matter? You have the emergency powers — you can disband the Council.'

Khomich spat. 'That was possible when I had the guards a hundred per cent behind me. But the guards look to you now. Andrew, if ever you trusted my judgement, believe me – Hallot will come here with flame-throwers! How can I convince you? Shall I go down on my bended knees in the Assembly? Tell me!'

They reached the bulge of rough concrete that protected Glasshouse from floods. Far above the base wall of brick, sunlight dazzled on towering glass walls, as if there were a furnace in the sky.

They ducked into an inconspicuous recess partially screened by an outcrop of tall nipplewort weeds. It was midafternoon and the yellow flowers were already closing. Steane took a last look back at the black earth, the soaring carrot plumes and the wreckage of the Net and its support pylons.

'There's only one way you can convince me, Khomich,' he said coldly...

They listened dumbfounded.

Khomich was on his feet, hands resting on the back of Steane's chair. The chair was empty. He sounded tired.

'No, it was not an animal that tried to break into Glasshouse last

night, it was a man. We must assume that he is still in the park. Deputy Commandant Steane is recalling Losey's patrol. No one must leave Glasshouse until we are sure he has gone from the great park.'

He sat down.

'You're really sure?' Reid asked in a voice that was almost a whisper. 'A full-size man...?'

Khomich looked at the polished table. 'You will see the footprints from the observation platform.'

They sat stunned, the elected Council and the heads of sections, waiting for Khomich to speak again. He went on staring at the table.

'How will we know if he leaves the park?' asked the woman Woodburn. 'It's a very big place — he could be *anywhere*.'

'We could send out patrols to keep him under surveillance,' Reid said doubtfully. Somebody snorted. 'All right, what do you suggest? We can't hide in the tunnel diggings for ever!'

'You're damn right we can't,' Gillick snapped. 'Why are you all pussy-footing round? We know what we have to do.'

All faces turned to Khomich.

He did not look up.

'Do I take it we want to radio Geneva for immediate assistance?' Lentillac asked.

A few heads nodded.

'You have a motion, Mister Chairman,' the woman Woodburn said shrilly.

Khomich cleared his throat. 'As commandant I am solely responsible for the lives of everybody in this Colony,' he growled. 'This is a Security matter and I forbid any radio transmission that can be picked up beyond the high wall.'

Steane entered quietly and stood for a moment with his back to the door. One or two glanced up at him but Gillick spoke quietly. 'This is *not* a simple Security matter and I propose that we take a vote.'

Steane slipped unobtrusively into his chair.

Khomich got to his feet.

'No! While I am commandant of this Colony—' He started to bang his fist on the table. Suddenly his body convulsed in a fit of coughing. They watched him in silence.

Khomich patted his chest. His eyes were moist. He sat down, looking old and vulnerable.

'What alternatives do we have, Commandant?' Lentillac asked briskly.

Khomich went to speak but his body was immediately racked by

another bout of coughing. He waved his hand at Steane. Lentillac nodded for him to speak.

‘As I see it following discussions with the commandant, we have three options,’ Steane said briskly. ‘One, we hide in Glasshouse until this intruder leaves the park. We have food for seven or eight days. We can cover most of the park with long-range patrols to keep track of his movements. Two, we maintain our normal work routines in the fields with a more extensive lookout system to warn us of his approach. The snag to that is the time it takes to withdraw the fieldworkers. Three, we attempt to make contact with Geneva and ask for a detachment of WFC troops to resume active surveillance of the park.’

Khomich glared at him. ‘There is another option open to us: to kill him!’

The faces stared incredulously. Then somebody sniggered.

Steane watched them in that moment when they lost their fear of the man once known as the Butcher. Revenge was delirious. All danger forgotten, their eyes relished the sight of a stupid old man making insane suggestions.

Khomich lost his temper. ‘I am the commandant of this Colony and I will say what we do!’

He only sounded petulant.

‘Maybe we should find a new commandant,’ sneered the woman Woodburn.

The suggestion, unthinkable a moment earlier, brought silence to the room. Steane sat back, face impassive. Reid murmured in Woodburn’s ear. She nodded. Lentillac fidgeted uneasily.

‘Can we have the vote?’ Gillick demanded.

Lentillac asked Khomich if he was prepared to accept whatever decision the Council made.

Khomich stared at the wall.

The Council voted with a show of hands. Two people abstained, the rest raised their arms in support of the motion to ask WFC HQ in Geneva for assistance.

Khomich’s brooding silence no longer had the power to intimidate them. His withdrawal seemed like mere sulkiness. Even then, Lentillac hesitated but Gillick and Reid had assessed the moment.

‘The commandant’s attitude leaves us no alternative but to consider his position,’ Gillick said.

Reid started to speak. Khomich came to life. He rubbed his face, looking very tired.

‘I have given you my advice,’ he growled. ‘If I don’t have the confidence of the Council I can no longer carry out my duties. Would you like me to withdraw?’

Gillick jumped to his feet. ‘No! If we let him out of our sight he’ll have a bunch of armed thugs waiting outside that door!’

‘Are you relinquishing your position as commandant?’ Lentillac demanded.

Khomich answered by pulling his pistol from its holster.

The whole room froze.

Khomich calmly placed the pistol on the polished table and pushed it away.

‘My last recommendation to the Council is to appoint Deputy Commandant Andrew Steane as my replacement,’ he said calmly. ‘I will place myself at his disposal.’

Impassively, Steane watched them racing eagerly into the trap...

The madness was their strength.

Savage teeth snapped and ripped at the yelling hunters. Vicious claws raked through cavy pelts and skin alike, but whichever way the weasel turned it faced the jabbing spears.

Thin teeth crunched through a man’s skull.

Three more men were already diving on its back, clinging to the rich brown hairs, using their weight to drag it to the ground.

The weasel’s snout formed a circle with its tail as it tried to snap at the men on its back.

The fire-hardened tip of a long spear ripped into its haunch. It rolled over, breaking the spear and hurling the hunter to one side. Its teeth fastened on a man’s leg and blood spurted over another man’s face. His hands tore at a small round ear.

The madness.

Gudenian ran in a circle, poised to pump another bullet into the thick fur. He saw Mason screaming and then the headless body disappearing under the rolling mass of bodies and fur.

Blood and dust and screams.

Gudenian threw away the rifle and grabbed Mason’s spear, hurling himself at the pointed face, ramming the spear between the needle-sharp teeth.

The weasel tried to rear up, its claws raking at Gudenian’s face.

The blunt end of a broken spear smashing into the weasel’s right eye.

Lesz clung to the rearing head, trying to force the wooden shaft deeper into the mess of clear liquid and blood oozing from the mangled eyeball.

They clung to its white belly and its tail and its viciously jerking legs, hacking at it with knives, slashing and tearing through lustrous hair that was streaked now with blood and yellow urine, hurtling over and over, bruised bodies being thrown off and coming back with ferocious yells, animal predator and human hunters locked in the savage intercourse of death...

Steane waited until the decision had been formally voted on and noted in the record book. Lentillac on behalf of the elected Council had solemnly shaken his hand.

Khomich sat at one end of the table, ignored by everybody.

Lentillac asked the woman Woodburn to go ahead to the assembly point, where Steane's appointment would be announced to the whole Colony.

'There are a couple of things I should tell the Council,' Steane said politely. Lentillac frowned and some of the others grimaced irritably but they were willing to humor him. At this stage anyway.

Gillick was already asking Chief Engineer Reid how long it would take to rig up the power supply to boost the transmitter. Steane waited patiently. Reid was saying it might be more realistic to hope their transmission would be picked up by the WFC garrison in Le Havre and relayed to Geneva.

'Fine — they could have a helicopter here by tomorrow midday,' Gillick was saying. Steane caught Khomich's eye. Gillick heard Lentillac rapping on the table and realized Steane was waiting to speak.

Steane clasped his hands behind his back, standing impassively until they were all seated.

'From the start I think you should understand that I would not have accepted the position of commandant without knowing I had the whole-hearted support of the Security Guard. I have discussed every aspect of the situation we now find ourselves in. Khomich was right,' he went on, 'this madman Hallot can only represent a threat to our very existence. If the last administration found us an embarrassment, Hallot's gang will regard us a dangerous aberration. We will have to deal with this intruder by ourselves. Obviously we can't skulk away in the tunnels hoping that—'

'Are you saying you don't want to radio for help?' Gillick demanded

incredulously.

Steane nodded.

‘The hell with you then,’ Burrell sneered. ‘We didn’t appoint you to—’

‘But you have appointed me,’ Steane snapped.

‘We can remove you just as quickly!’

Steane shrugged. ‘You can have another vote but as commander of the Security Guard I can tell you it will be a waste of time.’

Reid frowned. ‘The guards don’t even know Khomich’s been replaced...’ Then it dawned on him. His eyes opened wide. ‘You and Khomich – you arranged all this!’

‘We discussed the situation, yes.’

‘But you were in favor of asking Geneva for help,’ Lentillac protested.

‘I have changed my mind.’

‘Well that’s too bad,’ Burrell said angrily. ‘We’ve changed our minds as well!’

Steane put both fists on the table. ‘You can pass a resolution, yes. As commandant I will simply put the Council into suspension. The guards will back me to a man. You can go on passing resolutions and bickering — you’ll still be voting on it while the intruder is smashing down Glasshouse walls! I used to wonder why Khomich held your kind in contempt. My God, I realize now he was tolerant beyond imagination! You kicked him in the teeth — just as he said you would. Well, you’ve got me now and I’m going to tell you how we’re going to stay alive...’

Madness unleashed was a frenzy that could not be switched on and off.

They went on battering at the lifeless weasel until its head was a bloody, unrecognizable mess of bone and flesh and fur.

The madness was a drug that suppressed pain and fear but when it had fulfilled its function it seeped away as mysteriously as it had come. Pain-sensory circuits opened up again in their brains.

Reality presented its brutal reckoning.

Mason was a decapitated corpse.

Thorpe was bleeding to death through the shattered flesh and bone of his right thigh.

Young Lesz screamed for merciful death as guts and blood slurped out of his gaping belly.

Kirsten was sick, and when she tried to stand up she was sick again. The sight of the woman in the red and black uniform threatened to rekindle the madness in Gudenian. He stood over her, his chest heaving,

a broken spear poised to smash down on her short, fair hair.

She was mumbling something, her head hanging loosely and swaying from side to side. She tried to grab hold of his legs. He pushed her away with his moccasined foot. She collapsed on the stones. Her face was streaked with dirt and sweat and tears. She saw hate in his face, hate and lust.

‘There’s a full-size man in the park,’ she moaned. ‘I saw him, you must believe me...’

‘What are you doing here?’ he growled. ‘Where’s the rest of them?’

‘I’m the only one left! *Please*, you—’

He grabbed at her short, fair hair, forcing her head back, his knee prodding at her white throat.

‘Gudenian!’

He looked round. Abram was waving at him urgently, his face bloody and distraught. They were holding down the screaming Lesz. Kirsten tried to struggle.

‘I saw him! You must believe me!’

He kicked her away with a savage grunt and limped towards the men kneeling round young Lesz. He caught a glimpse of blood-wet hands and yellow guts shining in the sun.

One quick shot did it – then giant black crows came swooping down out of the blue sky...

Parr swept the big graystone house with his binoculars. He squatted in the shadow of a big bramble thicket, looking across a lawn cropped tight by rabbits. There was no movement in any of the curtained windows. He lowered the binoculars. It was an old-fashioned house, screened on three sides by an overgrown hedge of privet. Apart from a gray and white seagull perched on the red-tiled roof, there was no sign of life. He listened. Bees were buzzing round three or four wooden hives in front of a low stone wall with a rickety gate. He hated bees and wasps and all crawly insects and decided to make a detour and approach the house from the front.

As he got to his feet he heard another faint sound through the buzzing. He froze in the shadow, cocking his head. For a moment it sounded like a tiny, distant whisper of human voices, screaming and shouting ... he moved cautiously round the bramble patch and stopped to listen again. There was only the chatter of birds and the buzzing of stray bees passing overhead. He told himself that sounds carried long

distances on these warm, still days, the voices must have come from beyond the river ... either that or it was his imagination.

Yet, as he went down the flagstone path that ran beside the ornamental pools, he had an eery sensation of being watched. He looked round quickly, without warning, but nothing moved among the bushes.

‘You’re getting jittery, old chap,’ he muttered.

Black crows rose cawing as he came on a short open stretch between him and the shining water of the lake. He scanned the trees ahead, then his eye was caught by something on the ground, near where the crows had been picking. It was only a few yards ahead but he felt for the binoculars.

Careful to stay in shadow so that no glint of sun on glass could reveal his whereabouts, he re-focused the binoculars. There was a grainy blur of dead grass and stones and then he was looking at a dead duck.

Crossing the open slope, he had an even stronger sensation of being watched. He reached the dead mallard and frowned:

There were strings attached to its wings and feet!

Chapter 20

A narrow line of sunlight cut through the gloom of the small hallway.

Parr eased along the wall towards the door.

Not even the ticking of a clock disturbed the perpetual silence of the house, yet he sensed a presence. Leveling the shotgun, Parr calmly gave the door a violent push with the sole of his boot. It shuddered and swung back. A crash of wood on wood reverberated through the house.

Sequins of dust mushroomed up into angled shafts of sunlight from leaded bay windows. Still Parr did not enter the lounge. There was a broken plate on the dusty floor of the hallway. He looked from the cracked china back into the dusty room. He blinked.

The room had an occupant: a skeleton stretched across the floor as if still asleep, the white dome of the skull resting on the bones of an outstretched arm.

Silence returned to the house. Parr stepped onto a thick rug. The colored pattern was faded, like everything else in the lounge. He screwed up his nose against dust that rose in clouds where his boots touched the thick pile.

His eye caught a movement and he swiveled quickly, ready to fire underarm. It was his own reflection in a dull, dust-layered mirror.

He propped the shotgun against a big sofa and crouched beside the skeleton. At least he knew now why every window and door was locked and bolted from the inside.

Round the bleached bones there was a thicker, gray dust that had once been flesh. Curls of black hair still hung from the back of the skull. Brittle fragments of sun-bleached cotton rested against a drawn-up thigh.

He knelt beside the skeleton, reaching out to touch the white skull. There were no signs of bullet wounds or fracturing. Had she starved to death, or killed herself with drugs...? He shivered slightly, thinking of a woman dying alone in a locked house, and of sunshine giving way to dusk and darkness and then to sunshine again for ten or fifteen years...

He decided to take his pack upstairs, at least for the night. He picked a small rear bedroom with a window that looked onto the sloping roof of the kitchen extension. The bedroom had white walls and a heavy

door with a weighty key in the lock. There was a single bed with a white pillow and a turned-over sheet, but the thought of sleeping in it filled him with disgust. He opened his pack and dragged out his folded sleeping bag, spreading it on the bare wooden floor under the window. The air in the bedroom was stale but he decided against opening the window. He wasn't the only person in the park, he was sure of that now...

Passing the lounge door he saw the white skeleton again on his way through the gloomy lobby into an old-fashioned kitchen. There was a broken plate on the lobby carpet and a broken cup and a big kitchen knife on the Stone floor under the kitchen table. A chair had been overturned. He thought of a woman with shiny black curls cooking her last meal, struggling against the weakness of hunger ... he put the dead mallard and the silk-wrapped cavy on the sinkboard and went to search in a big walk-in pantry. He saw no remains of anything resembling food, although there were tins of salt and sugar and a shelf of pickle and sauce bottles.

Why had nobody broken into the house? Salt and sugar were worth more than gold these days. The locked doors and windows suggested a siege of some kind, yet there were no signs of damage.

The taps and rings of the big gas cooker were crusted with old grease gone black and flaky. He tried one anyway and to his surprise heard an immediate hissing. He craned to look behind the cooker and followed the line of a thin brass pipe to a hole in the wall plaster. Resting his hands on the sinkboard, he raised himself up to look out of the window. A big metal canister was standing in an open-fronted brick bunker. Bottled gas! After all these years of people starving and a black-haired woman turning to a skeleton in a silent house, the gas was still there, waiting for a tap to be turned!

He tried the sink taps. From one of them came a brown drip of water, then a thin trickle and fragments. Pipes gurgled. An air-pocket shuddered. The dark brown water burst out in a spew of brown jelly blobs. The dry shells of long-dead flies and moths swirled round in the sink.

He washed out a fine china cup from a row hanging on hooks in a carved oak dresser. The water was running clear. It was tepid and tasted metallic, probably from a tank under the roof. Still, it was better than ditchwater. He struck a match from an old-fashioned box that a farmer had hoarded for maybe twenty years, and lit the gas ring. Using his own knife, he skinned and gutted the fat little cavy and found an aluminum

pot to roast it in, adjusting the flame so that it would not burn a hole in the bottom.

He made another quick tour of the ground floor, careful not to show himself at the dusty windows. The sun was shining on bushes and trees but there was no sign of movement. He went back to the kitchen. The cavy was beginning to sizzle in its own fat.

He picked up the duck.

At first, when he'd found it beside a newly-dead weasel where the crows had been picking, he'd seen a simple explanation: long grass had entangled itself round the duck in its desperate struggle to escape the weasel; crows had then attacked the weasel to get the duck; both the weasel and the duck had been cut and slashed as if by vicious beaks and their eyes gouged out — farmers had told him that crows would pick out the eyes of a living sheep.

It made sense except for one thing: the grass strings were looped and knotted.

He had cut them off the pinioned wings and scaly legs. When he twirled the grass between finger and thumb he could see that long stalks had been neatly woven into miniature ropes.

So, there was someone in this park. Someone who had the ingenuity to make snares out of grass but who had never bothered, or dared, to break into this house.

He winced. His cut hand was throbbing. He went upstairs and searched in a bathroom cabinet, discarding tins of ointment whose labels had long faded, but finding an unopened packet of Elastoplast and a bottle of Dettol.

He was chewing on roast cavy flesh that tasted much like rabbit and thinking it would have been better with vegetables when he remembered the night before when he'd trampled into a net of some kind near the big hothouse. Gardeners used nets to protect seed patches, strawberries, young plants ... Still the question nagged at him — why hadn't they broken into this house? It was full of what people were killing each other for these days — he had even found usable tea in a big square tin.

He lit the gas again, filled a small kettle and stood at the cooker, warming his hands over the gas ring. The sun was going down but the sky was still blue above the tall hedge outside the kitchen window. When he broke the window in the hall to get in, he was the first intruder this house had seen since the woman died. Yet out there, in a big park surrounded by a high wall, *somebody* was tending a vegetable patch and

catching ducks with grass snares. He was beginning to get a picture of someone *timid*, someone who—

The kettle started whistling.

He lifted it quickly off the gas ring and poured boiling water onto tea leaves in a big china mug with blue and white hoops. He stirred in two teaspoonfuls of sugar and sniffed the familiar fragrance.

While he waited for the tea to infuse, he calmly washed congealed blood off the inflamed scar on his right hand by holding it under scalding water from the kettle. His horror of tetanus or germs of any kind transcended pain — the lone hunter could never whimper. His unseen audience responded with admiration as he poured raw Dettol into the pink wound without flinching...

Sipping hot tea, Parr walked from room to room. He had already made up his mind. Finding a place like this was the kind of luck that didn't come twice.

Staring out of an upstairs window at the red sunset, he said quietly, 'Where are you hiding, my timid friend?'

The long shadows of tall thistles stretched across the lawn. Beyond the wooden beehives, the massive blur of the house was tinged with a red glow. Kirsten asked them again for water and this time the dark-haired one called Abram relented. The other four men lay on their stomachs, looking out from the shelter of the big bramble leaves.

'Where are we going to spend the night?' she asked, handing back the flask.

'You'll see.'

Abram Chernitz screwed the cap back on his flask and hung it on what she recognized as an SG field-issue belt, drawn tightly round the waist of a long, smooth-haired jacket made from the pelt of an orange and black cavy. His trousers were from the same animal, tucked into SG field boots that were coming apart at the seams. His black beard was neatly trimmed. He caught her staring at him.

'Something wrong?'

'I was trying to remember if I knew you in Glasshouse.'

He shrugged. 'My name's Chernitz. I broke out with Gudenian when he killed Jimenez. Were you in the Colony at that time?'

'No.'

'How many they got there now?'

'More than ten thousand.'

One of the other men looked over his shoulder. ‘Ten thousand? Just as well we didn’t try to—’

‘Shut up, you!’ Chernitz growled. He stood up. ‘That’s the kind of information they sent her to find out.’

He cupped his hands round his mouth, looking out across the lawn towards the wooden structure of the hives. Above the gray blur of the house the sky was a deep purple. He made a thin whooping noise. They listened. He crouched down again beside her under the leaves. ‘How long has WFC been back in control of the Colony?’

‘It isn’t. Andrew Steane told me we weren’t even in radio contact.’

Chernitz fumbled inside his jacket and brought something out. He started to chew. ‘You saying that man is just a wanderer who’s strayed into the park?’

‘He must be. Could I have something to eat?’

‘Sure.’ He tore off a sliver of meat and handed it to her.

‘Rabbit,’ he said, watching her wolfing down the dry flesh. ‘We were going to have a big roast duck tonight. They had any babies yet in Glasshouse?’

‘No, only a few miscarriages.’

He grunted. ‘Gudenian was right then.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘He said—’

Out of the still evening air came a faint whooping.

‘They’re coming!’ one of the men hissed.

Weak from hunger, her whole body exhausted and bruised, she forced herself to her feet. At first she thought they were looking at the big dark shapes of rabbits grazing on the edge of the lawn within bolting distance of the huge bramble bushes, but then she saw something detach itself from the shadow of a towering thistle. Again Chernitz cupped his hands to make the whooping call. The big rabbits sat up, ears erect.

‘Is that a house over there?’ she asked. Chernitz nodded. ‘Is that where you live?’ He shook his head. Knowing she did not have much time before these wild-looking men would be making a decision about her, she let out a little sobbing moan. ‘They tricked me, you know. They started that fire deliberately to kill me!’ Chernitz showed no reaction. She could make out figures moving quickly from shadow to shadow, their faces catching the slanting rays of the red sunset. The other men picked up long spears and moved out beyond the leaves. She wanted to beg Chernitz for more meat. ‘What are you going to do with me?’ she asked in a small, pleading voice.

Chernitz walked away from her.

When people in animal pelts started running in twos and threes across the last stretch of open grass, she drew back into the shadows. At first they didn't see her. She listened to their urgent whispers and heard women's voices among them. Chernitz growled at them to keep quiet. She saw the last two figures come hurrying across the grass. One was Gudenian, tall and blond. Running stiffly to keep up with him was an equally tall man with white hair and a white beard. He frowned.

She was staring in disbelief at gaunt eyes above the white beard when there came the first stuttering note of a sound that was to change her whole life.

The incredible thing was, she later realized, that she didn't recognize the pathetic little wail for what it was. Indeed, it was possible she had never actually heard a baby crying before!

Unable to stop herself, she pushed among the men and women in animal pelts. 'Can I see the baby?'

Faces stared, hostile faces, suspicious and then resentful. It was the red and black uniform. She didn't care. Her stomach was turning over.

The shrill wail came from a furry bundle on the back of a young woman, with a tanned, peasant face. Kirsten smiled pleadingly, hands already reaching out for the little hood that threw the baby's face into shadow.

Magda Hoessner glared angrily.

'I just want to see your baby,' Kirsten pleaded.

Magda backed away. A powerful hand gripped Kirsten's arm and turned her round.

'Don't push your luck,' Chernitz growled. He looked round. 'You want her blindfolded, Gudenian?'

Gudenian hardly gave her a glance. 'Why? She won't ever be seeing Khomich again.'

He started to lead them into the eery world of shadows below the bramble bushes. Chernitz released her with a slight push. She found herself between two men carrying rifles and big packs made of some kind of natural fiber. The one behind gave her a shove in the back. Ahead of her the baby was still wailing. She wanted to hold it more than anything she had wanted in her whole life.

They were clambering among gnarled tree roots jutting out from a sheer bank of hard earth and stones when it came to her over a distant, unseen horizon, a voice that was not a voice but a warning tone, faint at first, immediately recognizable and becoming stronger.

‘He’s coming,’ she hissed. ‘The man – I can hear him!’

The whole party froze, clinging to twisted roots, pressing themselves against the overhanging bank of the submerged tunnel. Gudenian looked up. Far above, through a mass of branches and leaves, he could see small patches of blue sky. Nobody moved.

He looked down at the face of the fair-haired woman from Glasshouse. In the gloom of the deep tunnel her face was a pale blur that told him nothing.

‘I don’t hear anything,’ he muttered.

‘He’s coming this way!’

Chernitz pressed his ear against hard earth. ‘No vibrations,’ he whispered.

Gudenian leaned down to take the woman’s hand and pulled her roughly across a sheer drop onto the broad root beside him. She tried to get up from her knees but he kept hold of her hand, squeezing and twisting until she gasped with pain.

‘Please – my hand!’

Heavy drumming sounded from higher up the sloping tunnel. A big brown rabbit came bolting under the tree roots to disappear into a hole. Two more followed it.

Gudenian waved at them to get close to the bank. He vaulted to a lower root and steadied the woman with the child on her back.

Kirsten felt heavy vibrations pass along the root as she scrambled towards the bank on hands and knees. Somewhere overhead there was a sudden rustling of leaves, as if a giant wind had suddenly sprung up. Heavy footsteps resounded above them and then faded away.

‘She was right,’ Chernitz hissed.

Gudenian looked at her but said nothing.

In the gloom she sensed a heightening of the suspicion that came at her from all sides. She closed her eyes. A vision of tall glass walls shining in the sun appeared as clearly as if she were looking at Glasshouse. The voice without words had changed its tone, sounding more excited and more malevolent as it moved away.

‘He’s going to Glasshouse,’ she said loudly.

‘How the hell do you know?’ somebody demanded.

‘I searched her, Gudenian,’ she heard Chernitz saying. ‘She doesn’t have a transceiver.’

‘Watch her,’ Gudenian snapped.

Nobody spoke again until they were climbing along a broad ledge formed by a big root embedded longwise in the bank. As the root ledge

narrowed, people began to climb up and disappear out of sight.

A hand reached down.

She hesitated.

'You may need a friend,' said a deep, laconic voice.

She took the hand and found herself being pulled up onto hard earth.

'Bruce?' she whispered.

'Did they tell you I was dead?'

She had a hundred questions waiting to be blurted out but Bruce turned quickly away into the pitch darkness and somebody else pushed at her from behind. Hands steered her over a ridge of earth. She was thrust beside a wall and a rough male voice told her not to move. She huddled against cold earth and stones while people jostled past her in the darkness. The baby was crying again. She heard the clink of stone on metal. The baby stopped crying. She saw a spark and heard another clash of stone striking metal.

She closed her eyes and felt only suspicion and hatred.

Chapter 21

A spark turned into a soft glow. A man's lips and puffed out cheeks appeared in profile, blowing at the reddish light. A flame sprang into life. Twisted fibers crackled.

The flame traveled through the darkness in unseen hands and then she saw heads and shoulders in silhouette. The crackling noise grew louder and flames spurted among grass. The figures in hairy animal pelts knelt round a pile of wood and grass and leaves, blowing at the embryo fire until there was a gushing sound and a warm light dispelled the darkness.

The cave had started as a small hollow among the tree roots that had been exposed when the sloping ground collapsed. They had dug deeper into the bank, widening the hole into a cave and then into a chamber. Running across the roof was the underside of a big main root. Taking advantage of embedded stones and perpendicular roots, they had dug out smaller alcoves to give the impression of a big main hall with side rooms. She could see dry grass lining the floors of the alcoves.

As they threw on more branches from an alcove piled high with wood, smoke billowed round their faces. She coughed. One or two of the women gave her a quick look but now, it seemed, a collective decision had been made to ignore her. She looked for a face that might be familiar, then remembered that all of these people had broken away from the Colony about the time she had been nominated for Arcadia Two.

When the fire caught properly, sparks and smoke swirled up in a straight column, hitting the roof of hard earth and big roots then being caught in a slipstream of air. Her eye followed the facing smoke towards the rear of the cave where it disappeared into the roof with a faint roaring sound. Wood cracked and sparked. She desperately wanted to huddle beside the blessed warmth of the fire but any presumptuous move would bring their hostility to the surface. She held out her hands. Her gloves were torn and minus several fingers. She peeled them off. Some of the men were fixing animal skins to a row of wooden spikes above the circular entrance hole, letting them hang to form a curtain that would mask the blazing light inside the big earthen chamber. They

all seemed to have allotted tasks, some carrying wood for the fire, others opening the big packs made of straw-like fibers. Across the fire she saw the baby! The dark-haired woman was suckling it at her naked breast, watched by another smiling woman with short red hair. As the chamber warmed up, they began to take off their pelt jackets, revealing an assortment of undergarments, some still recognizable as the remnants of Colony issue thermal underwear, most made of a soft, stringy material which she did not recognize. She tried to count the number of men and women moving about the chamber, eventually settling for twenty-seven — only twelve of them women.

Still nobody acknowledged her presence. They began to gather round the circular hearth of stones that held the blazing fire, holding out lumps of meat speared on thin stakes. The aroma of roasting flesh made her feel desperate.

Gudenian was chewing on meat and drinking from a flask when he moved round the squatting figures and came to the curtained mouth of the chamber. 'Look-out,' he called over his shoulder.

Two men gulped down the food in their mouths and grabbed for some more before they left the fire and picked up rifles from a stack against the wall. She saw rust on a rifle barrel. One of the men had a grotesquely deformed face. At first she thought it was a trick of the dancing flames but when he stood near her she saw that half of his cheek had been torn away. Hard stubble grew round smooth scar tissue. She blinked, realizing that she could see his teeth through the gaping wound.

'Usual places, one up top, one back along the ledge,' Gudenian said.

The man with the grotesque cheek gave her a quick sidelong glance as he fastened his furry jacket at the neck with a wooden toggle and string. They both raised parka hoods that left only their faces exposed as they slipped through the curtain of hanging animal skins. Gudenian turned back to the fire.

'I'm starving,' she pleaded.

'Didn't they give you field-rations?'

'Yes, but I lost my pack in the fire.'

'That was careless.' He went round the fire. 'She says she's hungry,' he said loudly.

Nobody looked at her.

Gudenian had the face of a blond-bearded demon in the upward light from the fire. He stared at her through the rising column of thin smoke. Bruce, sitting cross-legged with a straight back, held up a hunk of

sizzling, fatty meat on a long stick. She came forward with as much boldness as she could pretend and took the stick. The meat was hot enough to burn her mouth. She blew on it, holding out her left hand to the flames.

‘We’ve had red and blacks claiming to be deserters before,’ Chernitz said calmly. ‘We got the truth out of them and then we staked them out for the insects.’

She juggled a fragment of hot meat in her mouth, blowing and sucking air to cool it. She knew how close she was to being killed yet she couldn’t keep her eyes off the baby suckling at the woman’s breast. Gradually all the faces turned up to stare at her. Steane had briefed her with names and descriptions of the people who had broken out of Glasshouse with Gudenian, and of those who had gone over to him later, when the fox had spoiled Khomich’s attempt to capture them. Months in the wilds had tanned and hardened the faces and most of the men had short beards but she spotted one woman Steane had particularly mentioned: Nadine Boden, an Englishwoman with Chinese features. She was the one who had really puzzled Steane.

‘Steane said you’d know I was trying to trick you but you were short of women and would let me live,’ she said.

There was silence for a moment. She bit into the warm meat.

‘You’re admitting you were *sent*?’ Bruce asked.

‘Not much point denying it, is there?’

‘On your own?’

She shook her head. ‘No, I was on patrol with three field scouts. They didn’t know I was going to desert.’

‘Where are they now?’ Gudenian demanded.

She used the moment to sit down, speaking quickly before anyone objected. ‘I shot one of them — Bagley, the patrol leader.’

‘Bagley?’ Chernitz stared incredulously. ‘*You* shot Bagley?’ She nodded. ‘I don’t believe you. Bagley was the hardest bastard I ever knew.’

She shrugged, speaking through a mouthful of meat. ‘He had his back to me. He was fighting Sissons. You know Sissons?’

‘I knew Siss. Remember I told you, Gudenian, Siss should’ve been with us.’

‘What happened to Sissons?’

She shuddered. ‘He was eaten by a snake.’ She saw the effect this had. ‘We were coming off the Sandpit onto that concrete playground. It just appeared and—’ She grimaced in revulsion. ‘Dirk tried to shoot it but it

was so *big*.'

'Dirk?' asked Nadine Boden.

'Dirkovitch. A field scout.' She saw Gudenian and Chernitz frown at each other. 'He was quite young, he hadn't been in the Colony long. He must have died in the fire – we got separated in the smoke...'

'And you found us all on your own?' asked a short, stocky man, older than the others. For a moment she couldn't remember the name that Steane had given her to fit his description.

'I was told to make for the lake area. Steane said you—'

'Andrew Steane?' asked Nadine Boden.

'I know Steane,' Chernitz said. 'You remember him, Gudenian, he was Lindsay's bumboy – young guy with a baby face.'

'He's deputy commandant now,' she mumbled through another mouthful of meat. 'In fact I think he's got ideas about taking over from Khomich.' She looked over to where Magda Hoessner was wrapping the baby in a shawl of some soft yellow material. 'He sent me to infiltrate your — your group and find some way of getting her and the baby back into the Colony. Khomich doesn't know I'm out here. Maybe he gave the order for Wildfire and Steane couldn't stop him, but if it hadn't been for Sissons we'd have burned to death.'

She had them curious now. As the questions began to pour out, only one face remained suspiciously aloof, the face with the white beard and the gaunt eyes. She told them about the changes that had followed Gudenian's violent escape, how the ruling Council had turned against Khomich, and how Khomich had suddenly allied himself with the demands for democracy made by the illegal opposition movement known as the Chalk Circle. She was careful to sound neither too brash nor too nervous, gradually letting them become used to her, keeping a note of cynicism in her voice as she told them of the new democratic set-up, establishing the idea in their minds that she, too, was a victim. Like most human behavior, hostility was a habit. Once the habit was broken, the original hostility became harder and harder to reestablish. Then sympathy became a habit. It might have been called an appeal to their sense of humanity.

It didn't work with Bruce.

'Everyone *knows* that Khomich still rules the Colony like a dictator,' she said. 'The open trials are a facade — people still go to the Compound or the Diggings if he makes up his mind. Worker participation has actually increased the production targets. Steane thinks Geneva is embarrassed by the existence of the Colony. The

administration could leave us to perish quietly without supplies or back-up ... or, they could use any excuse to prove the project has been a failure and do what they did before ...' She looked at Bruce. '... they used flame-throwers on Arcadia One, didn't they?'

Bruce stared at her impassively, his eyes giving neither confirmation nor encouragement.

'So what's Steane's idea?' Chernitz asked.

Somebody had produced a flask. People took a quick swig and passed it on round the circle. From the way they wiped their lips she knew it wasn't water.

'He told me he doesn't want bloodshed,' she said. 'I was to find out if Magda Hoessner had given birth but in any case I was to evaluate the chances of bringing you all back into the Colony. Steane told me that Khomich's planning a big military operation once summer's over. Steane says Khomich doesn't care if you're all killed ... including the baby.'

The flask was coming in her direction.

'Steane has humanitarian ideals, is that it?' Nadine Boden demanded.

Kirsten grimaced. 'He wants everybody to think he has. He told me to say there would be no victimization or punishment of any kind. All he wants, he says, is to find out if there is a baby and get Gudenian and Magda Hoessner back in the Colony so the doctors can find out why it worked with them and nobody else.' The flask was only two places away from her now. 'I guess you don't know that sexual relations are no longer banned in Glasshouse — in fact, they're encouraged.' She smiled. 'To be brutally frank, the whole Colony has become sex-obsessed.'

One of the women passed the flask to the man on her immediate left, the stocky man whose name she had been trying to remember from Steane's list of the original deserters. He hadn't spoken much but she sensed that he carried some weight in the group.

'She says they've had a few miscarriages but no births,' Chernitz smiled. The stocky man wiped the top of the flask with his palm palm and calmly handed it to her.

'Thanks.'

It had worked. She was included in the circle!

She raised the flask to her mouth.

Gudenian clasped his hands behind his head. One of the men threw two heavy logs onto the fire. Gudenian smiled grimly. 'I know where Steane's at. He gets us back in the Colony without any fighting and he's the hero of the day. You bet they—'

Kirsten made a violent choking sound as fermented fruit juice jolted

against her throat. Tears came to her eyes as she spluttered breathlessly. Chernitz started the laughter. She realized they had been waiting for her to take the flask. She managed a weak grin and passed the flask to the red-haired woman on her right.

‘I don’t touch it,’ said the red-haired woman, passing on the flask, ‘I’m due to have my baby very soon.’

Nadine Boden waited impatiently for the laughter to die down. She was trying to catch Gudenian’s attention. ‘It’s just the same old power games all over again,’ she said.

Gudenian snorted. ‘You expect anything else? I told you those bastards wouldn’t—’

‘The same old games are what makes the world go round,’ came Bruce’s deep, laconic drawl. Through wispy smoke, his grim eyes seemed to mock Kirsten, as if they alone shared her secret. ‘One thing the young lady hasn’t told us is her name.’

‘Kirsten Shadd,’ she said apologetically.

‘Why did Steane choose *you*?’

‘I was a political agent before I crossed over. They gave me a cover identity but he had a file on me.’

Bruce nodded slowly, waving away the flask of alcoholic fruit juice. Chernitz leaned over to take it. ‘You deserve top marks for your performance, Shadd,’ Bruce went on, his eyes never leaving hers. ‘The total honesty gambit is always effective.’

‘I’ve told you the truth,’ she shrugged.

‘I’m sure you have — ninety-nine per cent of the truth anyway. You haven’t told us how you were supposed to keep in touch with Steane.’

‘He said you would still have the transceivers you took from the field scouts you murdered. And our patrol had a radio.’ Bitterly, she added, ‘It was lost in the fire.’

Bruce raised his eyebrows. ‘And are you now saying you’re disillusioned because Steane was prepared to let you roast in that fire?’

‘That’s part of it.’

‘What’s the other part of it?’

She noticed Gudenian frowning slightly, as if he resented the old man for asking questions that he should have been asking.

‘I hate living in Glasshouse.’

‘Are you saying you want to throw in with us and live out here in the Wilds?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘I told you—’—

‘You hate living in Glasshouse, we heard that.’

‘We heard it from those red and blacks as well,’ said Nadine Boden. Nobody else spoke.

Suddenly Kirsten knew she was talking for her life.

‘What else can I tell you?’ she asked helplessly.

‘Tell us how you knew the man was coming before we even felt his vibrations,’ demanded the stocky man on her left. His name came to her then, Manuel Gento, the man Steane had told her had been a prominent politician and might be susceptible to persuasion.

‘I just knew.’

‘When did you decide you wanted to join us?’ Gudenian growled.

‘I don’t know — when the fire started — no, maybe before. Steane made it all sound so reasonable and yet I’d killed a man—’ She looked pleadingly at the hostile faces. ‘Then you didn’t turn out the way I expected—’

‘What did you expect?’ Magda Hoessner demanded angrily, still cradling the baby.

‘I was told you were living like — I don’t know, like animals. I was expecting to be raped!’

‘We don’t call it rape,’ Nadine Boden said icily, ‘we call it taking care of each other.’

If it was meant as a joke, it came too late to bring any smiles.

‘How did you know the man was coming before we even felt the vibrations?’ Manuel Gento asked again.

She hesitated.

Bruce yawned. ‘I told you to search her.’

‘I searched her already,’ Chernitz said doubtfully. ‘I couldn’t find any radio.’

‘Have a good look at her teeth this time,’ Bruce drawled wearily. ‘They were doing that years ago, fitting a false tooth that was really an electronic device.’

She pulled at her lips, letting them see her teeth. ‘Look for yourself — I don’t mind!’

Gudenian suddenly jumped to his feet, coming round the fire towards her. ‘You know what I think. I think WFC has resumed control of the Colony and they want Magda and the baby because they’re scared to hell we can start reproducing ourselves.’ He gestured grimly at her to stand up. She shook her head. He grabbed at her shoulders, dragging her to her feet. ‘I don’t believe somebody like you could make it all this way

from Glasshouse on foot. I believe that man brought you here because they knew we could easily evade full-size people blundering about and you were to lead them right to us!’ He started shaking her. ‘That’s right, isn’t it? You’re communicating with them right now, aren’t you?’

He shook her again. She gave no resistance.

Nadine Boden got to her feet. ‘Peta and I will search her.’

‘All right, I do have a communication device,’ she said quietly, ‘you don’t have to search me.’ She closed her eyes.

Hands grabbed at her. ‘Let’s see it,’ somebody growled.

She was pushed in different directions. There were the voices round about her, and behind them the other kind of voices.

She heard Bruce saying, ‘Why don’t you give her a chance to—

Other voices interrupted. The hands were pulling and pushing her. She could smell the fire and roast meat and alcohol on somebody’s breath. Suddenly she stiffened. She opened her eyes and looked slowly across the faces surrounding her. It felt as if she was hovering on the edge of a trance. She closed her eyes again and turned her head.

Then she pointed.

Without opening her eyes, she said, ‘He wants to betray you all.’

‘Who does?’ Gudenian snapped.

‘Whoever I’m pointing at.’

She felt the hands withdrawing.

When she opened her eyes she found she was pointing at the curtain of skins covering the entrance to the warm chamber.

Bruce’s drawl came from farther back in a shadowy alcove where he was shaking out a blanket of thick rabbit fur.

‘She’s trying to tell you she’s telepathic.’

‘What do you mean? She can read minds?’ Gudenian growled at Bruce. ‘Balls!’

Bruce shrugged. ‘There were other cases. That’s why she was picked — she doesn’t need a radio.’

‘Steane doesn’t know,’ she protested.

‘The other possibility is that John Lindop has already betrayed us,’ Bruce went on, turning his back to spread out his rabbit-skin blanket. ‘I mean, he’s out there, isn’t he, exactly where she’s pointing?’

If there had been anger on their faces before, what she saw now was much more frightening...

Parr moved the heavy automatic to his right hand and gripped the edge

of the black mesh net with his left hand. There was no point in trying to conceal his presence — his footprints were all over the soft black earth.

Walking backwards, he gave the vegetable net a brutal pull. Wooden stakes collapsed sideways and the net came dragging over carrot stalks and big cabbages, all of them in neat rows. There wasn't a weed to be seen.

Warily eyeing the big hothouse and the nearest bushes for any movement, he dropped the net and went to ease a big red carrot out of the earth. As he stooped down, his eye was caught by something metallic. He moved round to get the sun behind him and saw the little rails running between the rows of carrots in a gradual curve until they went out of sight under the collapsed net.

Parr laughed out loud.

Toy trains?

He couldn't believe it. The whole countryside had become a bandit-ridden hellhole and here, behind that big wall, some kid was playing with toy trains in a cabbage patch!

Some kid...?

He straightened up, looking round slowly. If there was one thing he'd learned it was that timid people could turn into vicious maniacs if they had children to defend.

Chewing methodically on juicy carrot flesh, he skirted the vegetable patch to reach the door of the big hothouse. From his trouser pocket he pulled a heavy metal bar with a forked end.

This time he didn't waste time smashing the glass panes but inserted the jemmy bar near the hinges of the metal-frame door. Wood splintered and cracked. The door lurched...

Chapter 22

Parr held his breath. From outside came the chattering of sparrows, the faint rustle of leaves.

He waited, shoulder jammed against a big iron pillar, right hand pressing the Mauser against his leg. He listened for human sounds — a mutter, a cough, a footfall, a gun cocking. Through dust and cobwebs on the tall glass panes he could see blurred outlines of bushes and trees under a pink evening sky.

Somebody was near, he could *feel* it.

His eye traveled along big pipes that came out of the base brick wall of the hothouse. A few straggly plants grew in rectangular brick flowerbeds. As his eyes adjusted to the diffused light he made out a flat wooden box on the concrete floor and beyond it, flush with a right-angled corner of the base wall, a bigger upright box.

He moved softly towards a pillar rising from the center of the concrete floor towards the metal beams that supported the hothouse's huge glass cupola. From there he could watch the gaping doorway, where a slanting shaft of sunlight cut into the soft gloom. He watched for a moving shadow.

The park was inhabited, he knew that for sure now. Against the outside wall of the hothouse he'd found a wooden cold-frame covered by glass and wire-netting to make a hutch-enclosure. When his shadow had fallen on the glass, pet guinea pigs had scattered from piles of fresh hay. They had water and seeds in earthenware dishes.

A fly buzzed through the doorway.

Timid people who kept children's pets ... timid people who hadn't broken into the house ... timid people who didn't even have the nerve to knock him off with a quick shot from the bushes...

Were they hoping he would just go away? He smiled.

Unless...?

That was it — they didn't have any guns!

Stepping out from behind the big pillar, he shoved the automatic under his belt. Turning his back on the open doorway, he unbuttoned his trousers and urinated, giving every appearance of a man who had nothing to fear. His water ran off in a gentle slope towards a central

drain grille.

Letting his boots crunch noisily on the concrete floor, he walked slowly between the brick flowerbeds.

He was whistling. Now that he had a rough idea of what kind of people they were, he wanted to tempt them out into the open. It seemed a long time since he'd spoken to another human being.

The wooden box in the corner came up to his chest. It had airholes — no, not airholes, little windows. It was a crate of some kind, probably for transporting exotic plants. On the flat top of the box was more evidence of a child — toy scaffolding that rose up to a little platform under the first inward curve of the glass wall.

He went to examine the second wooden box. It was a model building, with a flat roof and a courtyard in the middle. Squatting on his haunches, trying to look casual while listening for the slightest sound from outside, he poked at the little door with his index finger. It swung open. Parr stretched full length on the concrete floor, resting his chin on his hands. Above the doorway was a light bracket with a toy bulb! Through the tiny doorway he could see the walls of a corridor.

He chuckled.

'Clever little chap, aren't you?' he said out loud — immediately rolling over, hand poised to pull the automatic out from his belt. Nothing moved in the sunny doorway.

He got to his feet. He could imagine what the boy was like: ingenious, full of tricks, making models out of bare wood and laying out toy railway systems in a vegetable patch and keeping pets, probably didn't have any other kids to play with. He remembered his own makeshift toys — it had been just the same for him, making up fantasy worlds to beat the loneliness...

He went to the open doorway and stepped across the shattered door.

'Hey! Where are you?'

Wood pigeons shot off between the nearest trees like projectiles.

He listened.

The breeze moved steadily against the trees, turning leaves to show their silvery undersides. The sun was already touching the park wall beyond the hothouse. Its slanting rays had a curious effect on his footprints in the soft earth of the vegetable patch, accentuating the shadow until each imprint seemed to be filled with black paint. He bitterly regretted having damaged the net, seeing himself as the timid eyes in the bushes must see him. For the first time he realized how utterly alone he was. 'I won't hurt you,' he called into the lengthening

shadows.

He looked this way and that for the boy to emerge from the rustling bushes, a boy who was clever with his hands and as lonely as himself. They would be like brothers, living in this hidden paradise, he'd always wanted a brother, they had everything they needed – the house, animals to trap, vegetables, fruit trees, even beehives to be robbed of honey. They could go on foraging trips, explore, fish in the river, make snares and traps to catch rabbits and ducks, build bonfires, he would keep the guns to drive off wandering looters and criminals but there would be no more killing, the boy would never know the terrible things he had done...

He was searching in his pockets as he hurried back into the hothouse, finding a small notebook and a pencil. He crouched over the box on the concrete floor and rested the open notebook on the flat roof. He thought for a moment, then started to write in neat capitals... SORRY ABOUT THE NET. I LIKE YOUR MODELS. YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE SCARED – he chewed on the pencil and then grinned – COULDN'T I PLAY WITH YOUR TRAINS? F. PARR.

He was still smiling as he looked for a flap in the roof of the model building. He tore the page out of the notebook. Unable to find a flap, he got hold of the box at one end and lifted it carefully, intending to leave the note inside for the boy to find.

In the gloom it took a moment for Parr to realize that the little rooms that formed a sort of honeycomb inside the box were model prison cells, even to peepholes in the heavy doors.

Parr knew all about prison cells.

'You little bastard,' he whispered incredulously.

The little cells even had miniature plank beds with leather pillows!

'You horrible little bastard!'

He grunted with the effort of heaving the box up onto his knee and then lifted it as high as he could and hurled it down on the concrete floor. One side splintered. Small objects scattered round his feet. He brought his heel down on the flat roof, hammering at it until he had smashed the walls and the little model cells, his face absolutely calm. When the box was totally wrecked he strode across to the big box in the corner and swung his heavy jemmy in a vicious arc through the delicate scaffolding.

'You like making toy prisons?' he snarled, smashing the jemmy down on the wrecked scaffolding. 'You're sick, boy! Wait till I get hold of your parents!'

He was pulling the Mauser from his belt as he came out into the twilight. The note was still in his hand. He screwed it up and hurled it away as he kicked at the toy railway lines. Passing the cold-frame, he smashed his heel down through the glass cover and grabbed a black and orange guinea pig by the hindlegs...

Lindop's head lolled back.

Manuel Gento slapped his bruised face.

'Please – don't hit me,' Lindop pleaded through swollen lips.

'Tell me the truth,' Gento shouted.

'It is the truth!'

Gento slapped his face methodically from side to side, smacking slaps with his palms, stinging raps with his knuckles.

Gudenian gave Lindop a kick on the ankle. 'Tell us how you communicate, John.'

'She's lying,' Lindop mumbled. Blood from his nose was running down to the side of his mouth. 'I swear it Gudenian, she's lying...'

Chernitz poked into the white ash with a stick. Under the crust the mound was a bright red furnace. 'Get a blaze going, Abram,' Gudenian said. 'John's feet are cold.'

Lindop gasped and tried to drag himself back from the fire. Manuel Gento took hold of his left foot and twisted it brutally to one side as he pulled off the moccasin. Chernitz started placing new logs across the mound of ash.

Bruce rose stiffly. 'Just like old times in the Compound,' he drawled. 'Go to bed, old man.'

Bruce looked at Lindop's blackened eyes, so swollen now it was hard to say if they were open or closed. 'It's no secret – he's been wanting to to back to Glasshouse since the squirrel ripped his face. He thinks the doctors will give him his good looks back. For all I know he's got some idea he'll be lifted out by helicopter and taken to the Project laboratory and given his full-size body back again. Fantasies, Gudenian, that's not the same as betraying us. Unless...'

'Unless what?'

Nadine Boden emerged from one of the alcoves at the rear of the chamber.

'Unless you've come to regard a man's thoughts as treachery,' Bruce said calmly. 'It's called paranoia...'

They were staring at each other as Nadine came towards the fire

carrying a torn and stained field-uniform. She looked at Gudenian. He nodded. She dropped the red and black suit on the sparking logs. Folds of rubberized canvas began to contort and swell. Thin black smoke rose from tarry bubbles. An acrid aroma filled the cave.

‘Okay, so we all know how John feels,’ Gudenian said calmly. ‘But how did she know?’ He pointed back to the alcove from which Nadine had come. ‘We’re being set up for something, Bruce. First she appears, then a full-size man – then she points straight at *him*?’ He touched Lindop’s leg with his toe, looking at Bruce.

‘She doesn’t have any kind of communication device we can find,’ Nadine said after a strained silence. ‘She could’ve thrown it away, of course, or swallowed it.’

‘What about her teeth?’

‘They look normal.’

‘Why don’t you pull them out one by one?’ Bruce drawled.

Gudenian shrugged. ‘We’ll do that if we have to. Unless you’re suggesting we just kill them both and dump them in the lake and save ourselves a lot of sweat...’

Kirsten heard them arguing as she sat huddled in a rabbitskin blanket. Under it she was completely naked. The woman Sandor was still standing over her. The two women had stripped her and searched her from head to toe, sparing no indignities. She hadn’t expected anything else – what did frighten her was how the rest of the men and women in Gudenian’s band had simply crawled under their blankets and gone to sleep while she was being stripped naked and Lindop was being ruthlessly beaten. What had happened to these people?

‘I’m cold,’ she said to Peta Sandor.

‘We don’t have any clothes to spare for Glasshouse spies.’

Kirsten looked up at her. ‘Why are you jealous of me?’

Peta snorted and walked away.

So that was it, all the months in the Wilds had forged them into a closed group that would resent any newcomer, even a woman. Or particularly a woman...? What were they really scared of?

They were slapping John Lindop again when she emerged from the alcove. She had the rabbit-skin blanket draped round her shoulders, trying to hold it together across her naked thighs.

‘... Maybe telepathy isn’t such crap as you think,’ Bruce was saying.

She advanced towards the fire. On both sides people lay huddled in the shadows under blankets of fur. She looked for Magda Hoessner and the baby but couldn’t see them.

'She's admitted why she's here, Gudenian,' Chernitz said doubtfully.

'Sure. Sometimes the truth is the best trick of all.'

Kirsten squatted in front of the flames rising from the bubbling rubber of her field-uniform, pulling at the rabbit skin to hide her bare knees.

'Tell them for chrissake,' Lindop pleaded. His grotesquely scarred face was now lop sided with swollen bruising. She felt some pity for him but not enough. If it came to it, they would still let her live, simply because she was a woman. She looked up at Gudenian.

'He wouldn't believe me.'

'Too damn right I wouldn't believe you.'

'It seems as if you've made up your mind, Gudenian,' Bruce said. 'Or should I say, closed your mind?'

'Put it anyway you goddamn like. It smells like trickery to me and I've learned from the wild animals — they don't stay around to be tricked, they either run or they kill.'

'But we're not wild animals,' Bruce snapped.

Kirsten felt a rise of excitement. Getting them to argue among themselves was exactly what she'd hoped for.

There had been a moment, when she first saw the baby, just a brief moment when she'd gone soft. But her mind was absolutely clear now — she was going to get these people back into the Colony just the way Steane had wanted.

'We had four men killed today,' Gudenian said. 'Those kind of chances we have to take but, I told you from the start, we're finished with Glasshouse. You understand? Finished.'

'Even if it means dying?'

'We're a long way from dying.'

'We came out here to live in freedom, Gudenian, not to degenerate into brainless savages.'

Gudenian looked down at the fair-haired woman. She had her eyes closed. Then he looked at Bruce. 'That's right — freedom. They want to know why they can't have babies — because they live in a prison. You think my son's going to be brought up in a prison?' He shook his head. 'Uh uh.'

Bruce straightened, easing back his stooped shoulders. 'Gudenian, if you kill her, or Lindop, you're going to have to kill me as well. Because I'll be going back to the Colony.'

'Nobody's going back!'

Manuel Gento had watched them in turn. Suddenly he released Lindop's legs and stood up, shaking his head. 'This isn't right, Gudenian.'

No more torture.'

'If you feel that way, Manuel...'

'He's coming,' Kirsten murmured, her eyes still closed.

Gudenian gave her a quick look but nobody else seemed to have heard her.

Chernitz tried to reason with Gudenian. 'Manuel's right. Why don't we just turn 'em loose on the other side of the lake, let 'em make their own way back to Glasshouse?'

Gudenian grimaced. 'You've got a big heart, Abram,' he sneered.

'Where's the harm?'

'I'll tell you where's the harm. First the fire, then she appears. They've made up their minds to deal with us once and for all. So far they don't know where the hell we are. But you want to give them this treacherous bastard—' he kicked Lindop — 'as a guide? Well, I'll tell you, Abram, I don't care how many people have to be killed, I'm not going back to that big glass prison!'

'He's coming,' Kirsten said loudly. Gudenian frowned.

'The arrangement always was that any of us had the right to go back to the Colony,' Bruce said.

'Things have changed.'

Bruce nodded slowly. 'I'm beginning to see that, Gudenian.'

Kirsten opened her eyes. 'He's coming this way.'

Peta Sandor turned on her. 'Why don't you shut up, you Glasshouse whore? Did they tell you we were so short of women we'd—'

'I can feel vibrations!'

They all looked round. The red-haired girl, pregnant stomach bulging against fiber underwear, was moving round a root that slanted out of the wall, touching it with her splayed fingers. 'It's shaking!'

'Go back to sleep, Anita,' Nadine said patiently, going towards the girl, 'you're having those dreams again.'

The animal skins draped over the entrance shook violently. Gudenian was grabbing at a long spear when Allison pushed his way in out of the blackness.

'There's something coming, Gudenian! Something big!'

Lindop started to moan. Chernitz threatened his bare feet with a burning stock. Bleary-eyed people were emerging from the shadowy alcoves. One wave of Gudenian's hand was enough to silence them. He gestured at the rifles propped against the wall.

Then they could all feel the tremors.

The roof began to shake, grit fell on their awestruck faces.

Kirsten started to speak.

Gudenian swiveled the long spear and pressed the firehardened tip against her throat.

The next heavy impact seemed to come from directly overhead. Nobody moved.

The baby started crying...

Parr stumbled in the deep gloom among the trees. A spiky branch caught against his cheek. Panicking at the thought of being caught out in the open after dark, he slashed at the branch.

The Mauser slipped from his hand and thudded softly on the ground. Crouching forward to feel for it, he hit the top of his head against solid wood. The sudden agony made him clench his teeth — and he bit his tongue.

When his fingers touched metal, he fired a random shot into the dark bushes. Then, realizing his own stupidity, he got a grip of himself. Cursing silently, he moved in a crouch, stopping every few feet to listen, left arm raised to ward off branches looming out of the darkness, grimly vowing that tomorrow he would make them suffer.

Even when he had made it back inside the house and lit a candle, he could *feel* them lurking out there in the night. They weren't timid, they were stealthy and vicious and they were going to *die*.

His nerves were so jittery he almost dropped the saucer with the candle when its soft light fell across the thick rug on the dull white dome of the skull.

He spent that night sitting against a big zinc water-tank in the cramped attic space under the sloping roof, the shotgun cradled in his arms. For hours he grimly planned how he would track them down, finally being lulled to sleep by the gentle sounds of wind and rain on the tiles above his head.

Gudenian brought up the spear, the tip jabbing against Kirsten's throat, forcing her head back.

'He was looking for you, wasn't he?' She tried to shake her head. The hard tip prodded into her skin. 'But he didn't find you, did he?'

'You don't understand!'

'No, but you're going to help me understand – aren't you?'

Chapter 23

Rain was lashing against the towering walls of glass when they emerged at dawn from the underground labyrinth of machine-shops, storage cellars and tunnel dormitories.

A gusty wind was blowing raindrops through the gaping doorway. Most of them fell on the big door and its broken panes but some reached as far as the wreckage of the Detention Compound.

‘He knows we’re here now,’ Steane whispered.

‘Who is to say what he knows or thinks he knows?’ Khomich growled. ‘You think he’s coming back?’

‘Why — do you propose giving him an official welcome?’

Steane went red in the face. It wasn’t until they were back inside the wooden building that he remembered — he was the commandant now.

Warm, fetid air made him wince as he shouted down the access hatch. The first people to emerge were black-uniformed guards carrying rifles. He waited until he saw Area Captain Empie, a young SG officer selected for promotion by Khomich for his loyalty at the time of Bruce’s defection.

‘We’re evacuating the building, Empie,’ he said loudly, knowing that Khomich was watching him. ‘Tell them to start with their own quarters, pack up everything they can carry – and I mean everything. Then we’ll start on the offices.’

‘How long are we likely to be down there, sir?’

‘As long as it’s necessary.’

‘It gets very stuffy with ten thousand people breathing the same air.’

‘They won’t suffocate, man!’ Immediately he regretted his brusqueness. That had always been one of Khomich’s faults, shutting himself off from useful advice by snapping at people. ‘Do you have an alternative suggestion?’

‘We could disperse above ground, sir. Plenty of places among the Pipes — maybe even outside. Down there we’d all be trapped if the giant found us, sir, and—’

‘He’s not a giant, Empie!’

‘That’s what they’re calling him, sir.’

‘He’s a man, Empie, an ordinary man, very likely some kind of petty

criminal. If we start thinking of him as a giant superman we're finished. We always knew this might happen, that's why we dug the tunnels.'

'Yes, sir.'

As Empie turned away, Steane saw Khomich staring after the boyish young officer. There was a distant smile round the small blue eyes, a smile of pride tinged with an inner sadness, the kind of half-smile a mother might use to hold back tears as she watched her son set off down a long, dusty road.

In that brief moment in the crowded corridor it explained so many things it hardly came as a surprise. Khomich had picked them both for promotion above senior men, picked them and tolerated their mistakes – in his own case he even tolerated a clumsy attempt at conspiracy.

Khomich's boys ... he'd heard the guards calling them that.

He remembered now, there had been another young officer in Khomich's life, a name that often crept into Khomich's reminiscences...

He remembered the name as they went up the stairs, Robinson, a young officer who had been with Khomich in Arcadia One... he'd been taken by a scorpion...

Khomich's boys!

'I'm not going to call a Council meeting until we've cleared this building,' he said.

Khomich grunted sarcastically. 'Put the Council in suspension. We wouldn't hear their stupid comments for the sound of their bowels.'

'It would be a very stupid person not to be scared in these circumstances.'

The small blue eyes looked up sharply but Steane was already round the corner onto the next flight up.

'The Council will want to run and hide, radio Geneva for help, clutch at all the straws. Even thinking of asking those fools for advice is madness.'

'I'll see.'

Khomich was panting as he caught up and grabbed his elbow. 'You think I am stupid because I am not shaking at the knees? I will tell you why I am not afraid. For me, death would be a blessing.'

'I know that,' Steane said firmly.

Khomich was taken aback, but only temporarily. 'What do you know?' Steane was climbing quickly, leaving him behind. 'You don't even know what to do next! You think that uniform makes you fit to command this Colony? Why should they trust their lives to you? You're a fool!'

Steane stopped and looked back. 'They don't have any choice.' He

turned away and took the next flight two steps at a time.

Khomich did not catch up until they were on Tier Four, above the level of the base wall of Glasshouse. Looking out through rain-spattered glass, Steane saw the wrecked Net and the torn-up railway tracks. Water was already gathering in big footprints across the vegetable fields.

Khomich pushed between him and the window. 'They will beg me on their knees to forgive them and save them. Making you commandant was only a maneuver — what do they call you? My puppet!'

Steane could hear people running up the stairs towards them. Somebody was shouting his name.

'That's right, your puppet,' he said in a quiet, firm voice, 'but that's all finished, Khomich. You make one move against me and I'll destroy you.'

The small blue eyes almost disappeared in a smile that crinkled the broad, pink face. 'How? Destroy Khomich? You?'

Steane said one word, very quietly:

'Robinson...'

A guard saw them on the window landing and came clattering up the stairs. 'Captain Empie says to tell you, sir, the intruder smashed the glass roof of the cavy pen!'

Khomich went on staring at him. Steane told the guard to find Doctor Herdan and bring him to the Clinic. 'I don't care what he's doing — get him there in five minutes.'

'Yes, sir.'

Steane turned briskly to the window. 'Herdan might have something we can use — he was doing work on tetanus...'

Khomich stared at him, the small blue eyes blinking incessantly. It was a moment when words could only have hindered communication. Words were bricks thrown through windows. But the eyes of two men could lock together to form the perfect synaptic channel for question and response.

Then Khomich tried to bluster. 'I don't know what you're talking about—'

Steane raised three fingers and counted them off. 'Robinson... me... Empie...your three boys. Khomich's boys. That's the only thing you're afraid of — of somebody finding out... or maybe of finding out yourself...'

The heavy shoulders seemed to sag under a heavy weight. 'You'd do that to me, Andrew?'

Steane nodded. He felt no upsurge of pity for the man they had once called the Butcher but the battle had been won. All his fear of Khomich

had gone. That was the real challenge of Khomich: the battle against your own fears.

Even then, the man's reflexes refused to admit defeat.

Steane saw the thought in Khomich's eyes just before his hand moved. Steane shook his head.

'No, Khomich, you're not going to shoot me. Ask yourself — does power mean all that much to you? Just when all these people need strong leadership more than ever you want them to see us gunning each other down? Is that how you're going to save their lives?' Khomich's hand slowly withdrew from his holster. 'Fear wouldn't work any more, they're more afraid of what's out there...'

Rain fell past the window in curtains.

'What are you going to do?' Khomich muttered.

'Empie was right — we can't stay in the tunnels for much longer. He's found a food supply now and he'll stay in the park till it's stripped bare. We'll have no food for the winter. We'll have to kill him.'

'Locating him will be the main problem.'

'I want you to start forming up as many field patrols as we have radios for. I'm going to see if Herdan has any ideas about poison or bacteria.' He had started down the stairs, then realized Khomich was not following him. 'What the hell are you standing there for?'

'Those scientists said confrontation with a full-size human was never to happen. They said it would cause psychological breakdown.'

'Did they say who would suffer the trauma — them or us? We've turned into a pretty murderous race down here even by human standards!'

Parr threw the bones out into the small paved courtyard at the rear of the house. Only the skull remained. Smiling grimly, he picked it up and walked out into the rain.

'You see that?' he shouted across the thistle-dotted lawn, holding up the skull. He was grinning as he rammed it down on a gate-post, the socket-eyes and grinning teeth facing the shrubbery on the other side of the rabbit-mown grass. 'You're welcome any time to join her!'

He went back into the kitchen and wiped his hair and face with a towel. He felt fine. Anybody could be excused for getting a little nervy at night in a place like this, with creepy people sneaking about in the bushes.

Chewing on a raw carrot, he decided to make a proper search of the

house for useful items. Some of the cupboards were locked. He came back with the jemmy, enjoying the physical release of attacking varnished doors. He thought he would find more candles, lamps, maybe even guns—

‘Holy shit!’

‘Booze!’

Chapter 24

The temperature dropped eight degrees that night.

Around the moon-bright waters of the lake, muddy banks turned iron-hard and inlets froze over. The middle of the lake was kept clear of ice by the gentle movements of gulls and ducks roosting on the water in whole flotillas, insulated from the freezing chill by thick layers of oily feathers. Among them were the larger silhouettes of geese, first arrivals of migrating flocks from the north.

Alone in the house, Parr finished a vegetable stew beside a blazing fire in the lounge, continually listening for suspicious sounds. Three times he thought he heard something and grabbed the shotgun to make a nervous tour of cold, moonlit rooms. Each time he tried to ignore a frosted-door that led into the dining-room and a cupboard stacked with bottles. In the morning, he vowed, he would pour every drop of liquor down the kitchen sink.

A woman's anguished sobbing from a heap of nettle-fiber blankets made sleep impossible in the big cave under the tree roots. Her name was Willa. She had been finally told the truth about the death of Alfons Lesz in the fight with the weasel. Lesz had been her lover – her pair as the couples referred to each other.

To save heat they had blocked up the ventilation hole with stones, and a deepening layer of wood-smoke hung down from the roof of the cave. Two of the women were vainly trying to comfort Willa but all the women looked deeply shocked now that Gudenian had told them the four missing men were not on a foraging trip. The drawn faces and sullen eyes of the people round the fire told Kirsten that the Wilds had not, after all, robbed them of normal human emotions. Men with lacerated faces no longer had adrenalin flowing to anesthetize the pain of their wounds and the searing agony of cauterization with red-hot knives. The lanky young German, Schnellinger, kept wincing and rubbing his left hand, saying he had broken something. Willa's torment

gave them no respite from delayed shock, bringing to the surface an issue that Kirsten knew now must have been lying dormant ever since Gudenian had led them into the Wilds. The way Gudenian had gruffly explained it to Willa, putting a bullet through her lover's head was an act of mercy — the supreme test of comradeship Chernitz and Gento had called it, all of them trying to coax the girl into stoical acceptance of the inevitable. As they sat in silence round the fire, Kirsten was careful not to draw attention to herself. Killing an admitted spy from Glasshouse would be ideal therapy at this moment of doubt and depression.

Half-naked men, bodies running with sweat, hacked feverishly into solid clay six levels beneath the concrete floor of Glasshouse. They dug until exhaustion made their legs buckle, when they were dragged back along the tunnel to make room for fresh teams. Lines of men and women passed baskets from hand to hand, newly-dug clay being taken up for disposal, empty baskets coming back from the higher levels. All distinctions of rank and section-classification were forgotten in the race to extend the tunnel beyond the base wall of Glasshouse when a surface shaft would be opened up to provide a through-flow of air and an escape route.

As Steane reached the higher levels of the tunnel system, he met men and women bringing down the last pieces of furniture and equipment from the wooden building known as Control. In the big assembly hall at ground-level, hundreds of men were being equipped for field patrol. Khomich was barking orders, matching men and equipment, allocating radios and weapons as each six-man section came before a big grid-map of the park drawn in chalk on the concrete floor. Gone was the Khomich of brooding suspicion and volcanic tantrums – what Steane saw was a professional soldier fulfilling himself in a task for which his whole life had been a preparation. While they discussed possible locations for the radio control point that would co-ordinate communication between the field scouts and the main battalions, their eyes carried on another conversation altogether. Of the men preparing to go out into the Wilds, where hundreds might die in the attempt to seek out and destroy this most fearsome of enemies, only one could say, *For me, death would be a blessing*. Khomich's small blue eyes smiled at Steane. Already he felt he was looking at a legendary figure, a man round whom myths would grow ... a man whose immortality was assured, requiring now only the formality of his death.

Coming back into the lounge, Parr finished breaking up a high-back mahogany chair and put two of the legs on the fire. Bored and restless, he bit his fingernails. He made up a proper bed in the attic, beside the brick chimney piece for warmth. With the folding ladder pulled up behind him, he could get a good night's sleep and be ready in the morning for a complete search of the park. Maybe it wouldn't be necessary to kill all the people who were hiding out there in the dark: the boy would come in useful for finding firewood. Did he have a mother? This thought cheered up Parr and he took a book from a shelf. As he flicked through mouldy pages, his huge shadow moved behind him on the wall where the mirror hung. The book stank of dampness and in disgust he threw it on the fire. As if a signal had been given, a heavy fall of chimney soot crashed down on the flames, making him gasp with fear. The yellowing pages began to curl and flames licked round embossed lettering of which he could read only a couple of words, *Pleasure Garden*, before the book began to blaze. Tomorrow he would burn all the books, have a big clean-out. He made up his mind to get some sleep. He reached the door, then hesitated. It seemed less lonely watching the flames. He sat down again and examined his thumbnails. One drink, the voices jeered, he can't even trust himself to have one simple drink...

Allison shivered, rubbing his numbed hands before the big fire. He had just been relieved from look-out. The tip of his nose was red. 'Winter's coming.'

Gudenian reacted gruffly. 'What do you mean, *winter*, you? It's only an autumn frost. Winter's months away.'

'Jeez, if that's autumn we're in for a helluva winter!'

Gudenian snorted. Kirsten moved round the fire to where Magda was feeding the baby. It was a boy with black hair like his mother. Kirsten wondered if Gudenian was disappointed that it didn't look anything like him.

'Let's hope Anita has a girl and they can grow up together,' she said enthusiastically. Magda seemed to hug the baby closer to her bare breast.

The argument broke out without warning. Jenkins suddenly threw a piece of meat into the fire. 'Four guys killed in one day?'

'I alway said we should pen some cavies up in the yard behind the house and slaughter one when we need it,' Allison growled at Gudenian.

‘You want to spend the rest of your life hauling fodder? Next you’ll want us to plant crops like those zombies in Glasshouse!’

‘For chrissake, Gudenian, first a weasel then those goddamned crows almost got us!’

‘I didn’t come out here to be a lousy farmer! Farming makes you a slave — hunting means you’re free!’

In Magda Hoessner’s dumbly adoring eyes Kirsten saw a flicker of doubt — what if she had to choose between Gudenian and her baby’s safety?

Kirsten was surprised when Abram Chernitz turned on Gudenian. Chernitz was one of the original deserters and seemed to be Gudenian’s right hand man. ‘We came out here to make a life for ourselves — hunting isn’t a religion I’m willing to die for. And there won’t *be* any hunting with a man in the park.’

Gudenian spat in the fire. Then he looked at Kirsten. ‘Where is he now?’

She closed her eyes. ‘I’m not getting anything.’

‘What is it you hear exactly?’ came Bruce’s deep drawl. He was sitting apart from the others, his back resting against the cave wall, hands behind his head.

‘It’s hard to explain. It’s not words, not like a radio.’ She saw a quick frown on Gudenian’s face. Steane had said they must have radios but so far she hadn’t seen one. ‘It’s more like emotions, images ... it doesn’t work with everybody. I knew what Sissons was thinking but not Bagley or Dirk.’

‘Did you show any signs of being telepathic back in the Colony?’ Nadine Boden asked.

‘It started out on patrol — maybe it needs lots of space. I’ll tell you what is happening in Glasshouse — people are beginning to lose their memories. Sissons even forgot his own first name!’

Schnellinger gaped at her. ‘That’s happened to me as well. I’m finding it hard to remember *before* — I don’t get the sharp pictures any more.’

Gudenian grimaced irritably. ‘Sooner we all forget the goddamn past the better. We’re not going back so we stay alive, we make the best of things — like colonizing a new planet.’

‘Trouble is it’s the same old planet,’ Bruce drawled. ‘And one of our fellow aliens has come along to remind us.’

‘It’s a big park.’ Gudenian looked at Kirsten. ‘We’ll have you to warn us if he gets too near, won’t we?’

They all looked at her then. All except Bruce. Stiffly, he got to his feet,

his silver hair shrouded in smoke. As he came towards the fire, the walls and roof of the cave reverberated with drumming vibrations. They heard the thumping of heavy feet outside. Then the drumming faded away.

Tully, the duty look-out, stumbled through the animal skins covering the mouth of the cave. 'It was the rabbits, Gudenian! Something was chasing them out of their holes.'

'Another fucking weasel!' Allison groaned.

As they stared at each other in dismay, Bruce stood over Magda Hoesser. 'May I hold the baby?' Magda looked nervously at Gudenian.

'What do you want the baby for, old man?' Gudenian demanded.

'Old men like holding babies ... May I?'

Magda looked to Gudenian for help but he merely grimaced, his eyes fixed on Bruce. Reluctantly she held up the swaddled baby. She gasped – Bruce made no attempt to cradle it in his arms but held it aloft. The baby's eyes opened. Gudenian poised to spring up at Bruce. For a horrible moment, Kirsten's breath caught in her throat, thinking he was going to hurl the baby into the blazing fire.

The baby's plump features contorted in a spasm of fear.

'Give me my baby!'

Bruce held the baby even higher, out of Magda's reach. It started to wail.

'Can't you hear him?' Bruce drawled. 'Can't you hear what he's telling you?'

Twice Parr went to the frosted-glass door and twice his hand froze before the key touched the lock. Going back into the lounge for the second time, he threw the key onto the fire. He stood there, fingers clenching and unclenching. In a sudden explosion of violence, he attacked the shelves of books, clawing the mouldy volumes to the floor, ripping pages, kicking at tented hardcovers.

'We can hide from him, sure,' Bruce said. 'We can disappear into a hole and starve to death while he ravages the park.'

Magda had the baby in her arms again, smothering the podgy face with kisses. Bruce stood above the fire, his white beard throwing an upward shadow over the rest of his face. 'By the time he moves on, there won't be a single rabbit or cavy or duck left.'

Gudenian came round the fire, glaring murderously at Bruce. 'Touch

the baby again and I'll tear your fucking head off!'

Bruce stood his ground. 'Pity you're not so worried about his future.' 'I'll take care of his future.'

'Where? In a hole in the ground?'

'No, old man, not in a hole in the ground.' Gudenian tapped Bruce on the chest with his forefinger. 'You think the world ends at the high wall?'

'Fine — we can run away from this man but how many more men like him you think we'll meet out there? When do you see us being able to stop running, Gudenian?' Bruce went to the wall and lowered himself stiffly to the ground.

'But what can we do against a full-size man?' Nadine Boden asked.

Bruce put his hands behind his head and closed his eyes. For a moment Kirsten thought he had gone to sleep.

Peta Sandor sneered. 'Maybe he thinks we should try to kill him...'

'That's exactly what I do think, Peta,' Bruce said.

One or two sniggered. Allison got up to fetch more wood for the fire. He grinned at Bruce. 'You don't want us to starve to death — suicide would be quicker? You're crazy, old man.'

'He is not crazy,' Nadine snapped. 'You should hope you stay alive as long as he's done.'

'Shut up!' Gudenian made as if to punch Allison, who withdrew quickly round the fire. 'I want to hear it, Bruce.'

'You won't like it.'

'I don't have to *like* it.'

'All right. If you want your baby to have any future at all you're going to have to rejoin the Colony. That man's changed everything.'

People were already shouting and jeering. Kirsten saw the struggle Gudenian had with himself, glaring incredulously at Bruce, not wanting to hear the unthinkable, yet at the same time conscious of the leader's responsibility. Finally he turned on the others and shouted at them to keep quiet.

'Go on, old man,' he growled, 'tell us why we should walk into Glasshouse and let Khomich hang us.'

'That's not quite what I had in mind. We know they want Magda and the baby and you as the father, but the rest of us are renegades—'

'So why the hell—'

'Because we've got no choice. I've always preached against war and killing but either that man kills us or we kill him. There's one sure thing about human beings — we've always wiped out any rival species that

threatened our survival. And that's what we are now — a different species. The baby saw that. We've branched off from full-size people just as surely and irrevocably as the early hominoids branched off from the apes. God knows, I've always tried to keep clear of my fellow humans but I'm damned if I'm going to sit back and wait for total extinction! That man is our enemy — we can't live with him, we can't compete with him for food — so we have to wipe him out. We're just a handful — but we can do it with Khomich and Steane and all their goons. We belong to the same species. It makes me sick to admit it but it would make me a lot sicker explaining to that baby why we just sat here in a hole in the ground and watched its future vanish with the smoke!

It was almost dawn when Parr smashed his boot through the frosted glass in a paroxysm of fury that hurtled the diningroom door off its hinges. Ghostly voices screamed and shrieked in his ears as his shaking hand clamped round the nearest bottle. He could not read the label in the soft gray light from the window but it didn't matter. Fiery brandy exploded into his mouth and throat. He gulped again and again. When he lowered the bottle, his eyes were watering. He gasped, trying to get his breath back. Then he smiled. The silence was beautiful. As he picked his way through broken glass and stepped over the fallen door, the brandy bottle felt like an old friend in his hand. As he climbed the shaky ladder to the attic hatchway he was singing quietly... *'soothes the nerves and cools the blood...'*

Dawn was wet fog swirling gently among exposed roots as Bruce emerged through the animal skins draped over the cave entrance. He had an old pack over his fur jacket. Schnellinger was waiting for him halfway along the ledge.

'We're in the best position to make a deal we'll ever be,' Bruce muttered to Gudenian. 'You heard her — they've already had aborted pregnancies. If we leave it any longer they'll have babies of their own and we'll be just a minor irritation.'

'I hope you're right.'

Bruce smiled. 'It isn't a bad bargain, Gudenian — one healthy female in exchange for an old man and a boy?'

'Tell him we'll cut her throat if you don't come back.'

'I just hope I have time to open my mouth before he gets the rope

round my neck!’

Dawn for Raymond Dirkovitch was torture by hunger in a womb of warm feathers.

Chapter 25

Out of swirling fog materialized a big furry haunch.

A man's hand clamped across Kirsten's mouth. The grazing rabbit raised its head, ears erect. Kirsten had a glimpse of twitching whiskers and a gleaming eye and then it bolted. She heard feet drumming across the frozen lawn. Gudenian took his hand away from her mouth.

'I wasn't going to scream,' she hissed.

He wasn't interested. 'Are you getting anything?'

She closed her eyes again, putting her forehead against the cold stone. Gudenian grunted with exasperation when she shook her head. He leaned back to stare up at the massive escarpment of gray stones. The top of the wall was lost in soft gray mist.

Chernitz seemed glad of any excuse to retreat. 'Maybe he's gone...'

Gudenian shook his head and led them along the base of the wall. Their boots crunched softly on grass stalks frozen stiff with white ice. Cold came up through the soles of Kirsten's boots with each step.

The wall ended where a huge wooden pillar told them they were at the gate leading into the walled yard at the rear of the house. Kirsten thought she sensed something. She was careful not to let Gudenian see her closing her eyes. One moment of confusion — that was all she needed to escape into the mist.

There was *something*.

Chernitz made a little choking sound and grabbed Gudenian's arm, pointing up.

High above them, staring out into a thin swirl of mist, was a face without flesh, white and grotesque, the face of some ancient god from the titanic past. They stared up in awe. Mist eddied round huge teeth and gaping eye-sockets.

Chernitz swallowed. 'It's the skull...'

'You wanted to know why we don't live inside the house?' Gudenian breathed into her ear. He pointed upwards. 'That's the skull of a woman. The skeleton was stretched out on the floor...'

'He's done you a favor then,' she said briskly.

Gudenian frowned at her. 'You think you're pretty cool, eh?'

She shrugged, realizing she had made a mistake. He would be

watching her more closely now, making it harder for her to slip away. She still hadn't worked out how she could trick Magda into leaving the others in the cave. Maybe she would just have to grab the baby and run and hope they didn't catch up with her before she reached Glasshouse ... the baby was the key.

Far above them the mist thickened. Gaping eye-sockets stared out into a fog that soon enveloped the skeletal features.

Kirsten heard it then, a jumbled voice, coming in muffled waves. She had no time to close her eyes — Gudenian and Chernitz heard it simultaneously and took her with them as they hurled themselves among icy leaves at the base of the wall.

The huge voice came from high above in the swirling mist. The ground vibrated.

Huddled between Gudenian and Chernitz against cold stone, Kirsten saw a huge boot – the same boot that had almost crushed her to death in the Jungle.

The voice came to them in huge waves of sound, raucous and discordant.

The man was singing!

She had a glimpse of black metal tubing hanging beside a trouser leg. The giant boots crunched the white grass flat and disappeared into the mist.

As the vast singing faded into the distance Kirsten moaned with relief. It was only then she realized how tightly Gudenian was holding her...

Dirkovitch licked at the black ice on which he'd slipped. At first touch, his tongue stuck but warm air from his mouth and nostrils began to melt the ice and he lapped the smear of water like a dog. His hands and arms were shaking uncontrollably. He got to his knees, clutching at reeds that rose all round him, pulling himself off the flat ice onto hard, rutted mud. Laboriously he dragged himself up past the thick clump of reeds which hid the old mallard nest into which he had crawled the previous evening; the stinking nest that had saved his life.

Reaching the top of the slope, he managed to get to his feet. His left boot was torn open at the toecap. He shivered and dragged his sleeves down over his hands. He had no pack now, no rifle, nothing but his red and black uniform and a knife stuck under his belt, a knife that his fingers were too numb to hold. He had lost count of the days and nights since the fire, since he had lost Kirsten in the smoke.

Sharp cramp in his stomach from the cold water brought him back to reality. Kirsten was dead and he was going to die of exposure and hunger if he couldn't kill something — or find Gudenian's people. He moved slowly along the top of the slope, hearing the soft quacking of a drake from the mist that covered the lake. There were no acorns to eat here but if he kept going round the lake he would come back into trees...

The slope began to descend. Ice cracked under his numbed feet and when he looked down he saw water seeping up from his footprints. He changed direction. The ice became thicker. White frost covered small tufts of grass and broken reeds. He realized he was too far from the bank and changed direction again. Through ice that was black now, he saw the silver scales of a big, slow-moving fish just beneath his feet!

From all around him came the savage honking of angry geese...

‘Geese!’

Parr stopped among the trees and snapped the twin barrels of the twelve-bore Biretta into place. The mist was clearing from this high ground but it still lay like white candy-floss.

‘I don't know what more a man could ask, Parr old chap,’ he muttered cheerfully, sliding a bottle of brandy out of his jacket pocket. ‘Just a short taste to warm me up on a frosty morning.’ He unscrewed the cap with his gloved hand and raised the bottle to his lips. Instant warmth. He licked his lips.

He was conscious that he was talking to himself but where was the harm in it when you were lonely? ‘That's where a split personality comes in handy, old boy. At least it gives you somebody to talk to.’ He laughed quietly and screwed the cap back on the bottle and eased it into his pocket, the shotgun hanging loosely in the crook of his right arm.

By the time the sky had cleared to a brilliant blue and only the lake remained shrouded in mist, he was in position behind some bushes near a little ornamental bridge. He took another quick swig at the brandy and stood the bottle against a clump of reeds. When the mist cleared from the lake there were six or seven big black-necked geese moving among ducks and water-fowl. He waited until they were approaching the bank, then aimed the shot gun at where the little flock was thickest and squeezed both triggers.

He was yelling and roaring as he dropped the shotgun and came running round the reedy bank. Ducks and gulls and heavy-bodied geese

were rising in demented confusion from the churning water. He had hit two geese. One was flopping lopsidedly in a circle, the other was keeled over to show its creamy belly feathers and a webbed foot.

Parr's boots went straight through the ice, driving a protruding thicket of reeds into the bitterly cold water, crushing Dirk down, down into thick black mud.

Parr hurled the dead goose towards the bank and grabbed the other one by its flapping wing. Even with one eye a bloody mess and its beak half-shattered, it tried to bite his hand. He got a grip of its neck just behind the head and started to swing it round and round, yelling ferociously, arms whirling faster and faster, up to his waist in freezing water, his boots slipping deeper into mud. Then he let go.

The dead goose sailed in a high parabola and thumped onto the frozen bank. Parr waded back through broken ice. He was singing again... '*... wild goose, brother goose, which is best... ?*' singing at the top of his voice, wanting to terrify the sneaky bastards who thought they owned the big park.

A big bubble of mud-gas brought Dirk's body floating up from the bottom of the lake to bump gently underneath a loose sheet of ice...

'That was the man shooting at something!'

Bruce nodded, peering ahead at the first fire-blackened branches jutting starkly against blue sky. There had been the boom of a shot gun, the squawking and honking of ducks and geese, and then they heard the singing.

'Don't worry, son, he's a long way away.'

The young German looked at him nervously. 'We wouldn't stand a chance...'

'Why? He's only a man.'

'You said we belong to different species!'

'Can you see Glasshouse?'

Schnellinger looked back towards the high dark blurs of the trees. He could still hear the singing. 'He'll kill us as easy as flies!'

'Look!'

Bruce nudged him and pointed out across the fire devastated landscape of black stumps and white forest. Schnellinger saw a dazzle of sunlight in the distant sky. 'We'll be pretty conspicuous against all that burnt vegetation but—' Bruce saw the look on the young German's face. 'I don't mind if you want to turn back, son, no reason why you should

suffer because—’

‘Go back there?’ Schnellinger snapped. ‘Come on, old man.’

Bruce followed him, frowning. He waited until they were wading into charred grass touched lightly with frost. ‘Oh, it’s the *man* you’re afraid of. I thought you meant Khomich.’

‘Why are you so worried about old Khomich?’ Schnellinger sneered. ‘He’s going to need our help, isn’t he?’

‘I wouldn’t expect too much gratitude, son,’ Bruce drawled.

When they emerged onto the open lawn, the mist was clearing rapidly. Here and there patches of frost crystals gleamed in the sun. They kept close to the wall, passing huge wooden sheds on stilt legs. Kirsten heard a loud buzzing.

Gudenian saw her apprehensive frown. ‘Only our friends the bees.’ She didn’t understand. ‘We’ll go straight across, Abram, he won’t be back for a while.’

He was leading them out of the shadow of the wall into bright sunshine when they heard two thundering booms followed by a squawking commotion. Chernitz gaped up at big shapes high above them in the blue sky.

‘Bruce was right! He’s going to slaughter every living thing in the whole goddamn park!’

Gudenian increased the pace of his long strides. She had to run to keep up. ‘You saw him,’ she protested. ‘What can we do?’

Gudenian answered by grabbing her arm and pulling her along. The buzzing noise grew louder. They passed behind the towering wooden supports of the last but one wooden structure. She gaped up at slat walls. Gudenian’s fingers tightened round her upper arm. ‘Never seen a beehive before?’ he grunted.

The last in the line of hives had toppled over. Weeds and tall grass formed a screen round its tumble-down slats. For some reason, both Chernitz and Gudenian were grinning at her and then at each other. She frowned but they hurried her along, coming out in front of the row of huge hives. The buzzing was deafening now. She looked over her shoulder and jumped with fright.

Gudenian steadied her and pointed up to a ledge sticking out from the hive they had just passed.

‘Winter’s coming when you see that!’

She stared incredulously. Bees were pouring out from a narrow slit,

fighting among themselves. She struggled in Gudenian's strong arms, wanting only to run. He held her firm. She saw that some of the bigger bees were being dragged to the edge of the protruding slat and then being thrown over! They fought to keep a hold but the smaller bees were all over them, pushing and dragging and bumping them until they plummeted down to the ground.

'They're ejecting the drones,' Gudenian murmured. 'There's no food to spare in winter for useless males.'

Chernitz grimaced angrily. 'Why the hell don't they use their wings? They just crawl round in the grass till they die!'

She shuddered and closed her eyes, wanting only to shut out the grotesque images of furry bodies. Immediately the voice came to her — the distant voice of *madness!*

She struggled against Gudenian's grip.

'He's coming!'

They both grabbed her and then ran towards the tumble-down hive...

Parr bowed to the grinning skull as he barged the gate aside.

'Any visitors, ma'am?'

He was laughing as he kicked open the kitchen door. 'I'm back,' he shouted.

The house was silent.

He shrugged, feeling disappointed. He propped the shotgun against the table and heaved the two dead geese onto the sinkboard. '*I must go where the wild goose goes...* He rummaged under the sink for the biggest pot and held it under the tap. It was the easy way to pluck these big birds – dip them in boiling water and then the feathers just came out in your hand.

The gas ring flared up and died almost immediately.

He tried the other taps. 'Shit! The bloody gas has run out!' he cursed. Then he shrugged. The hell with it, he'd barbecue them!

He laughed. 'Now whoever heard of barbecued goose, you fool?' The bottle in his jacket pocket bumped against the table. He had a quick pull and put the bottle on the sinkboard beside the geese. It toppled and fell into the sink, brandy gurgling out and running down the hole. He blinked. Then he shrugged again. 'Plenty more where that came from, old chap...'

He went through the narrow hallway to the dining-room. He knew he was getting slightly drunk but what the hell, it was the next best thing

to having somebody to talk to. He looked at the faded labels, wondering whether whiskey or vodka went better with bonfire-roasted goose.

They watched through a narrow slit, still hearing his singing. 'He's mad,' she whispered.

'Drunk you mean.'

'At least we know where he is.' Gudenian turned away from the slit. 'Better dig out the transceiver, Abram. We'll give him five minutes.'

He saw Kirsten looking round the gloomy interior. Straw curtains hung across partitioned compartments. In the middle of the floor the wooden slats had been cut away and the space below filled up with stones. Bits of charred wood and halfburned logs lay in a circle on the stones. Chernitz disappeared into one of the compartments. Before the straw curtain fell behind him she had a glimpse of a box bed filled with downy feathers.

'You weren't expecting anything like this, were you, Kirsten?' Gudenian said quietly.

Uneasy in the face of his steady gaze, she looked round. Something gleamed in diffused sunlight from an angled doorway. Gudenian saw her peering at it and nodded for her to follow him. He stood facing her across a curved mound of what looked like transparent amber. He pointed. She went to touch the shiny surface, then withdrew her hand with a little gasp.

'It's a mouse!'

Gudenian nodded. His big hand rested on the gleaming mound. 'He brings us luck,' he said. 'The bees covered him with that stuff – they were defending the hive. Maybe we've all gone crazy out here...'

He was staring at her when Chernitz reappeared, wrapping a black transceiver casing in oily paper. 'It's still giving off static so I guess the batteries have some life left,' he was saying as he came towards them. Gudenian went on staring at her. He had held her against the wall and then he had held her arm and now his eyes were telling her that none of it was an accident.

'We'll go one by one,' he said briskly. 'You first, Abram. Keep the hives in a direct line with the house. If we get split up, make for the cave. Okay?'

Chernitz nodded, starting to lift his rifle strap over his head.

'No, you keep the rifle,' Gudenian said. 'I'll have Kirsten to take care of.'

Chernitz didn't notice anything. Gudenian went with him through the angled doorway. She heard him telling Chernitz to run like hell for the thistles. Chernitz said something and then she heard running footsteps.

Gudenian came back slowly, catching hold of her as she made for the doorway. 'What's the hurry?' His voice sounded strained. She looked up at the blond stubble and then at his eyes. 'They sent you to infiltrate us, didn't they?'

She tried to push him away but his arms felt like stone. 'The man!' she hissed. His arms encircled her shoulders. 'The man's busy getting drunk. Maybe he's feeling lonely...'

Wood splintered on stone as one of the legs of the kitchen table broke against the wall of the paved yard. Parr hauled the table over the wall and let it crash upside down on the grass. Hunger was making him bad-tempered and he kicked at the broken leg. He cursed himself for having killed those women – one of them could have been cooking for him, and washing his clothes.

Seeing the wooden hives, he realized their thin wooden slats would make ideal firewood. He started towards them, then went back into the house for the iron jemmy.

Chapter 26

They met in brilliant sunshine, the tall, gaunt man with the white beard and the burly man with the big cropped head and small blue eyes.

‘Hullo, Khomich,’ Bruce made no attempt to free himself from the red and blacks who held his arms.

Khomich nodded slowly, surveying Bruce from toe to head. ‘You’re not dead, I see.’

Bruce looked round. ‘Only six of you? I’d never underestimate your talent for killing people, Khomich, but this time it isn’t just a bunch of hungry peasants.’

‘You know where the intruder is?’

‘We have a little horse-trading to do.’

‘My orders are to locate the man and destroy him, I will not waste time.’

Your *orders*?’ Bruce raised his eyebrows.

Just for once, as if such a thing were remotely possible, which it wasn’t, he thought he saw Khomich blush!

‘Andrew Steane is now the commandant,’ he growled, ‘but I am in command of five hundred men. What are you in command of?’

‘They tolerate me and let me bore them with an old man’s experiences.’

‘Where are they?’

Bruce shook his head. ‘You won’t ever see them, not unless you agree to our terms.’

‘You are in no position to make terms!’

‘I feel a trifle exposed here. Do you think we might get under some kind of cover? Not that there’s a lot left after your goddamn fire.’

Khomich nodded and the red and blacks allowed Bruce to turn. When they reached the shadow of the bramble outcrop, Khomich faced him again.

‘I have field patrols all over the park — I don’t need your help to find him,’ he barked. ‘When he has been eliminated we will round up your gang of criminal traitors! What terms?’

‘It’s a very big park and there’s only a few of us and we know all the places to hide,’ Bruce said calmly. ‘Furthermore, we have the baby.’ He

saw a flicker of the small blue eyes. 'That's what we're really talking about, isn't it? Your girl Shadd told us you've still not produced any children back in that industrial prison. Oh yes, she made it, Khomich – told us a lot of things about Glasshouse. I'm not so sure she ever wants to go back.'

Khomich sneered. 'You are welcome to her. Tell her there will be more fires to run from.'

'She says Steane doesn't go in for mass destruction – he probably doesn't know how much you enjoy it.'

'I will do what is necessary. Are you going to help us or not?'

Bruce suddenly felt tired. The hostility was a ritual that had lasted for more years than he wanted to count, all the way back to another crisp, sunny day under an aching blue sky. 'I'm going to sit down,' he said wearily. The two red and blacks made to haul him back to his feet but Khomich waved them away. He squatted down beside Bruce, his powerful thighs bulging in red and black field trousers. His jacket was open at the neck. When Bruce looked closely, there were lines on the pink skin under his jawbones but just for a moment it was as if the years had never been and they were meeting for the first time beside a sparkling lake...

'Yes, we'll help you. That's why I was coming to Glasshouse,' he said irritably. 'If you give me your word there won't be any hangings, no victimization, no punishment of any kind — well, we're all willing to come back. It's going to be a hard winter ... and I think we both know how important that baby is to all of us. You give me your word?'

'You would believe me?' Khomich asked softly.

'Yes.'

Khomich looked away, clearing his throat. 'I give you my word. Anyway, Steane wants you all back. Now—' he coughed and his tone became harsh again. '—will you stop wasting time, you stupid old man?'

As they got to their feet Bruce smiled and looked out into the sunshine. 'It's okay, son,' he called.

Khomich and his five red and blacks looked round quickly. The tall, blond figure rose cautiously from behind a clump of dead stalks higher up the slope. He was still aiming the rifle at them.

'You probably don't know Schnellinger,' Bruce said. 'I'm glad he didn't have to shoot you before he'd had the honor of meeting you, Khomich...'

Khomich glared at Schnellinger and then at Bruce. From his chest came a growling cough that might have been the first uprise of

involuntary laughter. It was suppressed at birth.

‘Give me the map,’ he snarled at his red and black patrol leader. ‘Where is the man?’

‘The house, Gudenian thinks,’ Bruce said, finding the grid square with his forefinger. ‘Is it a military secret how you propose to kill him?’

‘We have two hundred rifles—’

‘He’s got a shotgun! One cartridge would spray enough pellets to wipe us all out!’

Khomich shrugged. Quietly, so none of the red and blacks could hear, he murmured, ‘Does it matter to you and me...?’

Through the narrow slit they saw the giant figure coming nearer. In her terror, Kirsten’s fingers dug into Gudenian’s bare arms. He pushed her away, dragging on his furry jacket.

‘Run!’

She backed away quickly from the wall and tripped over a thick log.

The buzzing of bees made Parr stop in his tracks. He hated bees and all insects. He hesitated for a moment, then spat and turned back towards the house. Once he had a blaze going he vowed he would set the hives alight and burn the vicious little brutes to death. There was plenty of firewood in the house. The hell with it – he wasn’t going to stick around this haunted, stinking dump for long enough to need *furniture*.

He knew his mistake now. You couldn’t do it on your own, what you needed was a gang. Carrying chairs and books and cushions, he came in and out of the house, throwing everything between the upturned legs of the table. Yeah, with a little gang of his own he could take over this whole countryside! He had a bottle of some old-fashioned booze propped on the wall near the gate-post with the skull and each time he went back empty-handed to the kitchen he took a swig and toasted the gaping eye-sockets. Malt whiskey, that’s what was on the faded label. ‘... *if the whiskey don’t get you, the wimmin must!*’ he sang to her. She went on grinning.

By the time he decided to light the fire, his eyes weren’t focussing too well. Kneeling beside the jumble of broken chairs and torn fabrics and torn books, he struck the first match so brutally it broke in two, the flaring head bouncing on his thigh.

He took another drink to steady himself. This time he opened the

matchbox upside down and all the matches fell out on the grass. He grinned.

‘I’m doing all right,’ he assured the watching faces, ‘a lot of you people wish you were going to eat roast goose with Frankie, I’ll bet!’ He struck a match at the wrong end. ‘Shouldn’t drink on an empty stomach,’ he said reprovingly.

The next match flared. He crouched on his elbow to hold it under the curled leaves of a mouldy old book. ‘Ow!’ He shook his hand and licked his burned finger. They were laughing at him now. He got to his feet and walked steadily into the kitchen and turned on the tap. He splashed his face and then shoved his head under the running water. Blinking his eyes clear, he picked up one of the geese and carried it outside. Flames were licking up the pile of jumble.

He looked for something to place the goose on, like a proper barbecue, but it didn’t seem worth the effort.

‘To hell with fancy cooking.’ He grinned and dropped the heavy bird into the middle of the flames. There was an immediate stench of burning feathers. He screwed up his face in disgust and backed away, taking another pull at the bottle. He heard sizzling — wasn’t that how the Chinese invented roast pork, some kid accidentally burning down a shack with the pig inside? He laughed, remembering the story from when he was a kid. They liked the taste of burned pig but they thought you *had* to do it by burning down the whole house, and for hundreds of years every Sunday the whole of China was smoking with ... he screwed up his face and hung his head. Why did you have to remember things like that from when you were a kid?

His nostrils caught the whiff of roasting flesh. He licked his lips and went towards the big blaze, wondering how it had fired up so quickly. It was too hot to get near. To hell with it. Let it burn itself out. He went back to the wall and pulled off his jacket and let himself slide down, stretching out his legs. It was nice in the sun, just sitting ... he tilted the bottle to his mouth.

‘Makes you very thirsty – drinking,’ he shouted.

No, they didn’t like a joke, They were creepy people, sneaky people, timid people, they lurked in the bushes and spied on you and wouldn’t even come out to say hello. He sniffed and then the tears came. ‘I didn’t really mean to do all those things,’ he sobbed. ‘Why weren’t they nice to me? They hated me before they even knew what I was like! Bastards!’

He sniffed again and wiped his eyes. To hell with them. He would collect a gang, the woods were full of guys like himself just wandering

about on their own. Yeah, if they got themselves organized there was nothing they couldn't do! With enough guys he could go back to London and clear out all the rats and get things organized — that was the whole secret, getting yourself organized ... his eyes began to close ... yeah, that was it, get a small army ... his head dropped forward and he shook himself. The table was on fire now. To hell with it. He'd burn the whole house down before he left ... his eyelids drooped again ... or maybe he could use the house for their headquarters while he was recruiting his army ... his head flopped sideways and the bottle slipped from his hand...

'He's snoring!' Abram Chernitz called over his shoulder.

They came towards him in a line, red and blacks with their rifles, Gudenian's men in furry jackets.

'Where is Gudenian?' Khomich growled.

'He was right behind me with Kirsten — over there!' Chernitz pointed across the open lawn. 'They're probably trapped inside...'

They came to a crouch under the leaves on the edge of the huge bramble forest. The deep snores seemed very close in the clear air. They could see the giant figure of the man against the wall. Flames danced in the sunlight and across the flat lawn of rabbit-cropped grass and tall thistles came a tantalizing stink of roasting flesh.

'It's the best chance we'll ever get,' Chernitz muttered. 'Where the hell's Gudenian?'

Khomich snorted. 'He is not essential.' He gestured behind. Another patrol of red and blacks was pushing through the dead leaves and jagged stalks to join the rows of men facing out across the lawn.

Chernitz hissed between clenched teeth. 'You start firing at him you'll only waken him up! Gudenian wanted to — hey!'

He pointed.

Two small figures were running between towering thistle stalks. They reached a big stalk and dropped to a crouch. Chernitz pursed his lips and took a deep breath. It was a low, whooping whistle that could have been made by a bird. The two small figures detached themselves from the shadow of the huge stalk and started across the last, open stretch. Gudenian and Kirsten fell panting into the lines of men under the leaves. His chest heaving, unable to speak, Gudenian sat forward on his knees, chin touching his furry jacket.

Khomich stood over him, waiting. Gudenian went on dragging air into

his lungs. Khomich reached down to put his hand under his chin and pull his face up.

‘So. You are the leader of these renegades, Gudenian!’

The big blond man slapped his arm away. ‘Get your fucking hands off me, Khomich!’

Khomich snorted and turned to look at the fair-haired girl. He made as if to reach down.

Gudenian clawed himself to his feet and brought his hands down on Khomich’s shoulders, turning him round.

‘Get away from her!’

Khomich made no attempt to free himself. The small blue eyes stared unflinchingly. ‘I have given my word to Bruce,’ he said calmly. ‘There will be no punishment for what you have done.’

‘I don’t give a good goddamn what you’ve promised!’

‘—but that does not apply to any crimes you commit now. Stand back.’

Gudenian gave him a heavy push. Khomich staggered slightly but held his ground. Gudenian turned to look at the rows of red and blacks. He snorted. ‘Concentrated fire? That your master plan, Khomich? The moment you hit him he’ll be wide awake and stamping us into the ground!’

‘You have a better idea?’

Gudenian helped Kirsten to her feet. ‘Where’s Bruce?’

‘He’s gone with your women, he is too old for this.’

‘He told me he’s only a year older than you, Khomich. I’ll tell you how we’ll do it. Get your men to pick up every dead leaf and twig they can find. Hey, Abram, you remember that bit of glass we tried to carry from the house rubbish-dump?’

While Parr snored and the flames began to die, they came across the lawn, small running figures carrying branches, dry leaves and dead grass. While Parr’s stupified dreams took him to dark city buildings, two rows of men staggered under the weight of a long sliver of glass.

Parr dreamed of laughing women and a half-smile curved his gaping mouth. The small figures froze where they stood as his gigantic snores were interrupted by a long, choking rush of air into his mouth. His head lolled and he slumped sideways against the wall, one arm falling slowly to the grass, his hand open loosely, palm uppermost. The thunderous snoring started again and his chest rose and fell.

The small figures hesitated, then advanced quickly in small groups, following the directions of the big blond man.

The sun glinted on Parr's even white teeth and wet gums.

The small figures swarmed round his ankles and his floppy shirt.

The sun sparkled on glass being carried by two lines of men, with more men running to help them. From Parr's gaping mouth came a low moan and his fingers clenched. Then his head rolled sideways and his fingers relaxed.

They flocked round the big sliver of shining glass, raising it high above their heads to lift it over his half-curved fingers. When it was poised over his wrist, Gudenian gestured urgently, making the groups on either side change position. When he gave the signal, they lowered the glass diagonally onto the blue-veined wrist.

The two teams began to sway, nervously at first, then gathering momentum.

Shining glass seemed to slide into pink skin and up spurted a row of little blood bubbles. Gudenian ran back until he could see the men positioned at the waist and ankles. He raised his arm.

Shining glass suddenly disappeared under an upswell of dark, pumping blood.

Gudenian's arm scythed down through the air.

In his dream, Parr was climbing a high wall. He felt good. Behind the wall there was an orchard, with apples and pears and on top of the wall, cruel slivers of glass were embedded in cement. He cut his hands! He was still going to get over the wall, he could see the apples, but there was a fire, he was falling into it!

His eyes opened. He had a nightmare vision of small people running away from him. He mumbled something. He didn't want any more to drink.

Staggering drunkenly, he struggled to pull himself upright and smacked his head against the wall. As he clutched at his temple he saw spurting blood. Suddenly the wall was red hot. It seared against his stomach. He knew it was only a nightmare but the pain felt real.

In the nightmare, flames burst from his belly. He tore at his shirt waist, but his ankles started burning!

In the nightmare, his whole body was on fire. The same nightmare in which he'd seen the tiny running people.

He screamed, slapping at his shirt and his trousers. Burning leaves and twigs fell out of his clothes.

In the nightmare, he rolled on the grass to crush the flames, rolling

over and over until he smashed into the wooden legs of a beehive. The big wooden box fell across his chest.

In the nightmare, black bees buzzed at his face. He flailed at them with his arms. Blood sprayed out in big drops. From hands and knees he lurched to his feet. He covered his face with his hands and ran screaming across the lawn.

Distance was nothing in a nightmare. Leaves and thorns whipped at his face and hands then there, through the trees, was the shining lake. He tripped down a slope and when he fell his hands, clawing at stones and earth, were shining red, as if his skin had been peeled off in one piece.

In the nightmare, he staggered headlong down towards the sanctuary of the lake.

In the moment of the splash, icy water sculpted the outlines of his body, an enveloping chill that carved and defined the exact contours of his face and neck and chest and buttocks and calves.

Searing pain dissolved into numb reality. As water engulfed him in silence, Parr woke from the illusion. The nightmare was real! His arms and legs lashed out, arms fighting upwards for air, feet kicking down for a foothold. He went on sinking, thick mud squeezing apart under his weight.

Down, down, into choking blackness.

The first of them reached the edge of the slope above the ornamental bridge to see a commotion of water. The man's head erupted from the lake, black mud and water masking his face. There was a darker color on the churning surface as his arms threshed to keep him afloat, the dark red of blood. His mouth gaped but it was not a scream that burst forth, it was a solid jet of water, as if sound had materialized in physical form.

He went under again in a swirling of black water and red blood.

They gathered in the shelter of massive tree trunks, tiny figures in animal pelt clothes and red and black uniforms, watching in awe as the man grew weaker and weaker, his violent struggles only pumping more blood from the severed artery at his wrist...

When his titanic battle for life was over, he floated face down, partly in reflected sunlight, partly in shadow cast by trees that towered far beyond their vision-range.

In the moment of his death they realized that the last cord had been

cut. *They* had killed one of that other species to which they had once belonged and which had tricked them into a living death then rejected them for failing to die. They stared in fear at first as the dead men began to drift imperceptibly into bright water – fear at the enormity of what they had dared ... but soon the fear turned to awe at this numbing revelation of their own powers. They were now, truly, a new species, with nowhere to run and hide but the future...

Kirsten Shadd knew what was in his mind long before he formulated the thought. They were waiting in the gloomy tunnel under the exposed tree roots, watching the women climbing down from the cave. She saw him stiffen as Manuel Gento handed the swaddled baby down into Magda's upstretched arms.

Kirsten looked round quickly. Bruce and Khomich were standing apart from the rows of red and blacks, talking quietly.

When Gudenian looked at her, she shook her head before the question had been asked.

'No,' she murmured, 'I won't come with you.' He frowned. 'I was telling you the truth all along — I don't know how or why but it works — with some people...'

'You want to go back to that prison?' he growled.

'You can't do it, Gudenian. Your son wouldn't survive the winter. I don't think Magda would come with you anyway.'

His face tightened. He watched Magda being helped along a thick, sloping root. 'I don't need anybody,' he muttered.

Her slim hand rested on his bare arm, her fingertips delicately feeling the contours of steely muscle.

'Look at their faces, Gudenian ... your own people, Khomich's people, just look at them. Who are they watching? *You!*' He shook his head angrily and made a move towards Magda. Her slim hand could not be shaken off. 'Why give up your son, Gudenian? Why give me up?' Her voice was an urgent, whispering provocation ... and a promise. 'You're the leader they want, Gudenian. Steane lost his chance when he stayed behind in Glasshouse. The guards are with you and power goes with the guards. You can have your son and me! Power, Gudenian. Don't run away from it — *take it!*'

Chapter 27

Small birds chattered and bickered above the huge walls of glass. Sunlight streamed in through the vast, gaping doorway.

They stood together, ignored by the seething thousands, the tall white-haired man with gaunt eyes and the cropped-headed man with small blue eyes and tank-like shoulders. They watched Gudenian being acclaimed again and again as he gruffly promised blood and sweat and *freedom*.

They saw the guards pinion Andrew Steane's arms behind his back and march him off into the wooden building.

They saw Gudenian hold aloft the swaddled infant. Beside him, blushing shyly, stood the dark-haired Magda Hoessner. Behind, smiling innocently, stood the slightly gawky figure of Kirsten Shad.

'This wasn't how you planned it, was it, Khomich?' Bruce muttered. Khomich grunted irritably. 'How does it feel?'

'How does what feel?'

'To be left behind.'

'Speak for yourself, *scientist*.'

Before Bruce turned stiffly to follow the crowds, he tapped Khomich on the shoulder. The small blue eyes stared up at him. 'We both made the same mistake, Khomich ... we let ourselves grow old.'

Khomich slapped his hands behind his back and swayed gently on his heels, his eyes mocking Bruce. 'I'm sure they will find you a dark corner where you can lie down and die. For myself, I will be here when they come begging for my help ... they think they have won a war?' He shook his head. 'It hasn't even started!'

That night in the radio shack they heard a news transmission from World Food Control in Geneva. A group of army officers had seized power in the name of the people. Elections were promised for the very near future. By order of a military tribunal, Hallot and his associates had already been executed.

Gudenian silenced the clamoring voices by smashing his boot through the radio equipment that was their last link with that other world.

‘What the hell do their *names* matter to us?’ he snapped. ‘They are the enemy, that’s all we need to know!’